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Dark and Bright

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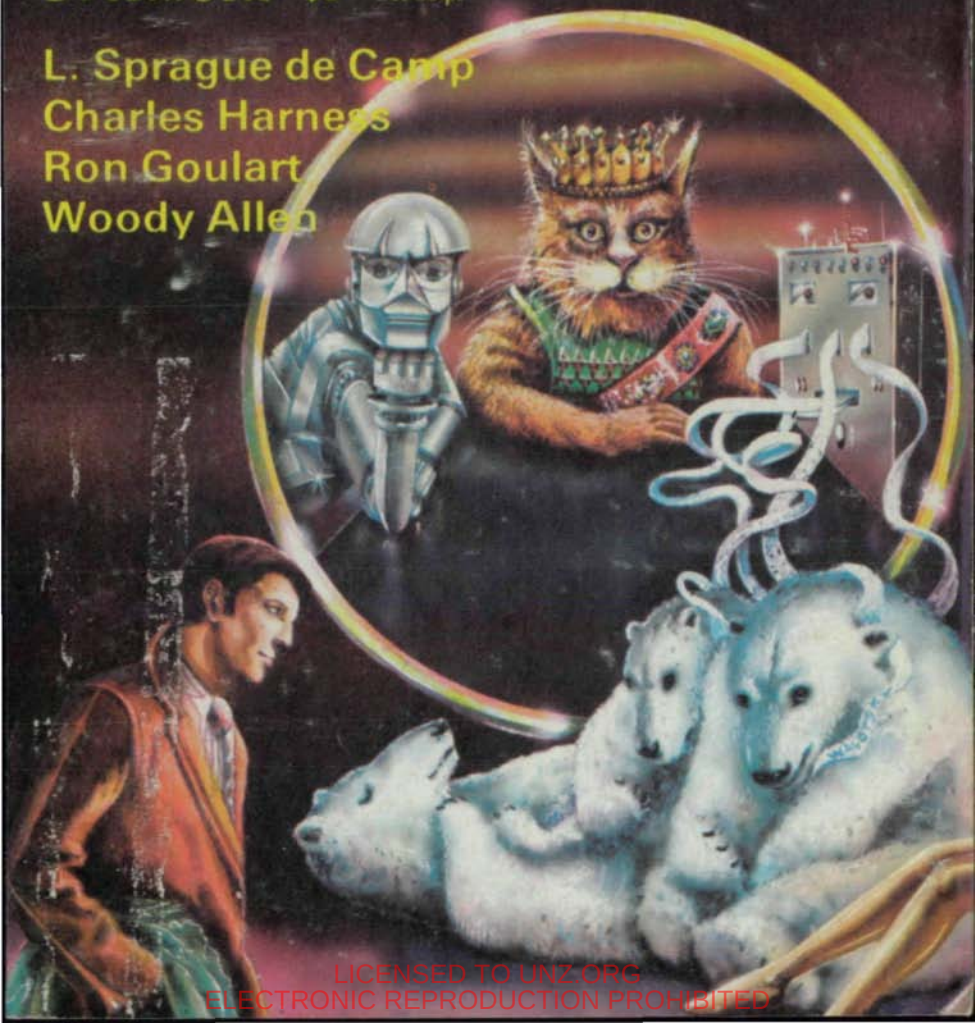

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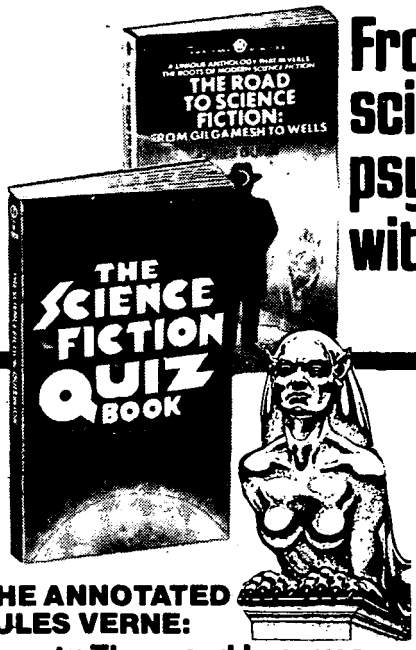

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A new Jose Silvera story from Ron Goulart, who reports that he and artist Gil Kane have created and sold a new science fiction comic strip called STAR HAWKS. STAR HAWKS takes place in the same Barnum system in which Silvera and other Goulart characters operate. The strip will appear in U.S. and Canadian newspapers beginning in early October.

Assassins

by RON GOULART

Jose Silvera stepped into the office out of the ranging blizzard and asked, "Where's Art Hammocker?"

The three polar bears jumped him.

They had been lounging, a bit too casually, around one of the red desks in the literary-agency outer office. Burly polar-bear men, each dressed in a one-piece synfur all-weather suit.

The first one to reach Silvera tackled him around the knees; the second pinioned his arms, and the third butted his shaggy white head into the freelance writer's stomach.

Silvera was a big man, well over six feet. He gave an annoyed roar now, commenced fighting back. "I haven't had a reception like this in an agent's office," he said as he freed one leg and kneed a polar-bear man in his furry groin, "since I tried to collect a royalty check from MCA-Venus."

"One of these," growled the polar bear who was punching Silvera's head, "artists, boys."

"Yeah, a pansy, no doubt." The middle polar-bear man was trying for another heat-thrust into Silvera's middle.

"We'll make short work of him," promised the third, who was still hopping around the circular orange office with his paws clutching his crotch.

"That's what they thought on Venus," remarked Silvera. He dropped, suddenly and unexpectedly, to his knees, at the same time tossing the polar bear who'd been working on his head over into the yellow-orange wall.

The force of the collision was enough to dislodge the igloo clock from its perch.

Silvera caught the battering-ram bear by the shoulders, gave him a flip which sent him over to smash into his associate, who was

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just sliding, slowly, down the bright-striped wall.

Resting a buttock against a gold desk, Silvera said, "Now, then, where can I find Art Hammocker? He owes me $5000."

"Cripes, I'm glad I don't owe this guy any money," observed one of the polar-bear man. He was helping his two companions to gain upright positions.

Ignoring Silvera's question, the three of them made a stumbling dash across the office and out into the howling snow.

Silvera noticed quite a few drawers in the orange filing cabinets had been pulled out, papers were scattered on the yellow floor. "So maybe those guys don't work here," he said.

"Oh," moaned a faint voice.

Silvera approached, cautiously, the gold door to the inner office. He booted it open.

Sprawled, face up, on a brown desk was a long, slim nineteen-year-old girl with hair the color of clover-honey. The short skirt of her one-piece officesuit was twisted around her smooth thighs; her left boot was not on her foot but dangling from the light-strip fixture above the desk. "Oh," she repeated.

Springing to her side, Silvera helped her sit up. "What happened to you?"

The pretty girl blinked. "I think I may have been gang-banged by polar bears," she replied in a weak voice. Slowly she brushed tufts of white fur off herself, then examined her person. "Well, no, it appears they never got around to that. I fainted ... isn't that a silly thing to do? ... It's as though I were a young girl or something."

"Aren't you a young girl?"

"Well, yes, I am," she admitted. "Except this is a very responsible job I hold here with Scott-Marryat Galactic Literary Agents. So simply because three loutish polar-bear men burst in and threatened to have their way with me, I shouldn't go swooning as though .... Where are they, by the way?"

"They've departed."

"I've been in Jelado Territory for seven months almost, and that's the first time anyone's tried to molest me."

"I think they were after something else as well."

The girl clapped her hands to her chest just above her breasts. "You mean they've looted the office?"

"Possibly. They were going through the files when I walked in."

The girl shivered. "Does it seem warm enough in here to you?"

"Yeah, fine."

"I was born and reared way on the other side of Barafunda, in a warm zone. Even after all these

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months in Jelado, I can't get used to it all the time snowing. Is it still snowing out?"

"A blizzard."

"All you had to worry about in my home territory were earthquakes and lava flows. But, as I keep explaining to my widowed mother, you can't pursue a literary career and expect to be comfortable, too. So I ... Oh, did you have business with us? I should have inquired sooner, except being nearly ravaged by those louts ... My name is Mini Tremaine. I'm in charge of this branch of the Scott-Marryat Galactic Literary Agency. We have branches on all the planets in the Barnum System and the Earth System. Who are you?"

"Joe Silvera."

Her head jerked back, her eyes went wide, her mouth opened. After a few seconds, and some deep frowning, she said, "I've been dreading your arrival."

"I'm not here to assault you. I'm trying to locate Art Hammocker."

"Yes, I know," said honey-haired Mini. "I'm the one who answered your calls from various parts of the planet. You're more frightening on the pixphone screen than in real life, Mr. Silvera. You don't glower as much up close like this. You want some money Mr. Hammocker allegedly owes you?"

"Yeah, allegedly $5000."

Mini nodded, rubbing at one bare knee with her fingertips. "I'll never get all this polar-bear hair off me," she said, shivering again. "We have a problem, Mr. Silvera. Several maybe."

"Mention one."

"Well, the biggest thing is, Art Hammocker has vanished."

"Art has a way of vanishing when people are trying to collect money from him."

"No, this isn't like that. When you called the first few times and I told you we had no idea where Mr. Hammocker was, I was fibbing," said Mini, lowering her head. "It took me quite a long time to get used to fibbing, but, as I explained to my widowed mother, you can't go very far in the literary world unless you fib."

"True," agreed Silvera. "Where's Art?"

"He's truly lost this time, Mr. Silvera. He has completely and utterly disappeared," said Mini. "I fear it's something serious, since I've had his on-signing check for the latest book in the Assassin Family series on my desk for near a week. He simply wouldn't not come in for a check."

"Yeah, that is uncharacteristic of him. Nobody else seen him?"

"No one I can find. I've contacted everybody who's even remotely connected with Mr. Hammocker. His apartment house com-

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puter, the man who's doing special research for his new book, sundry others. No one recalls encountering him after the latter part of last week."

"I'll find him."

"Oh, that's right. I've heard stories about you. If anyone owes you a few, you're like some inexorable fate dogging his steps, like some implacable fiend of—"

"I usually collect, yeah. Now suppose you—"

"Are you in Jelado to do a book for someone, or merely to dog Mr. Hammocker's foot—"

"This side trip is mainly for Art Hammocker and the $5000," said the big writer. "I was over in Tripas Territory doing some freelance editing, so I—"

"What were you editing?"

"A magazine for the Girly Chain."

"How fascinating. I've always thought editing almost as fascinating a profession as writing. Which magazine?"

"It's called *Sexual Excesses Symposium*. Readers write in and describe their experiences, and a panel of qualified experts comments. That's who I was for a couple months, the qualified experts."

"That is fascinating," remarked Mini. "And all the more reason why I believe you're exactly the man I'm looking for."

"For what purpose?"

"Well, with Mr. Hammocker vanished and the deadline moving ever closer ... the Assassin Family books come out twice a month, as you may be aware."

"I ghosted four of the damn things two years ago, which is why Art owes me $5000."

"Then you're even more perfect for what I have in mind. You see, Tinker & Associates, the publishers, are extremely anxious for us to come up with someone to do the next Assassin Family book. Or possibly the next two or three, depending on how long Mr. Hammocker stays vanished. Would you be int—"

"What does it pay?"

"Well, I imagine a freelance writer with your universal reputation would get what Mr. Hammocker does, $5000 per book."

"Son of a bitch, he told me he was getting $3000."

Mini rubbed at her knee again. "So would you be interested? I don't know if you have to go rocketing off to some other planet to—"

"I'm due on Murdstone in three weeks to do six horse stories for girls. I'm free till then."

"Horse stories?"

"A horse is something like a grout, only with fewer legs. Novels about them are very popular in certain parts of Murdstone right now."

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"Could you turn out an Assassin Family book in only three weeks?"

"Can do three if I have to."

"Fascinating. I'll get up an interview with you and Tinker & Associates for this very afternoon." Mini, steadying herself by holding his arm, left the desk top. "I hope you don't have any ... well, prejudices."

"About what?"

"Well, Tinker & Associates is the branch of a very large interplanetary conglomerate," explained the blonde girl. "Everyone in the local office is ... well, a machine."

"I've got nothing against machines," Silvera told her. "Make the appointment. And do you know if Art did an outline for the latest book?"

"Oh, yes. He did. He always has to submit a three-page outline of each Assassin Family book before Tinker & Associates issue a contract." Mini crossed, a little unsteady still, the room and stepped into the outer office. "I have a faxcopy in my files out here. I'll ... oh."

Silvera followed her into the recently looted room. "Yeah?"

She was on her pretty knees in front of one of the orange cabinets, shuffling through the scattered papers. "This is very odd," she said. "Very odd. The outline for the latest Assassin Family book isn't here. Those polar-bear men must have stolen it. What do you make of that, Mr. Silvera?"

"It's odd," he said.

"Haxtree! Haxtree!" cried the lizardboy, waving a faxpaper in the snowy air. "Assassin Fandom tries again! Fails to do in King Billy! Haxtree! Haxtree!"

Silvera ignored him. Pulling the collar of his anti-elements greatcoat up higher around his neck, he pushed out of the snow storm into the high conical building which housed Tinker & Associates.

It was tropically warm in the robot-staffed reception lobby. Mechanical butterflies flickered from artificial potted palms to air-floating bowls of neoplaz flowers.

The robot behind the large triangular reception desk was wearing a multicolor sarong. Lights in his silver ball-head flashed warmly. "Welcome to Tinker & Associates, the largest publishers of softback books on the entire planet of Barafunda. Publishers of the Assassin Family series, the Slaughterer series, the Haunted Nurse series, and the number-one reprint topseller this month on Barafunda, *I Slept with a Watermelon* by Miss X, a brilliantly perverse story of—"

"I know, I wrote it," Silvera said to the mechanism. "I have an appointment with the Editorial Committee."

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"Ah, with EdCom, eh? Your full name, miss?"

"Mister. I'm Jose Silvera."

"You just told me you were Miss X."

"A nom de plume."

"Ah, the writing game," sighed the saronged robot. "Its ways never cease to astonish me. Take elevator 19 to the 6th level, Mr. Silvera."

The elevator was in a bad mood. "So I tells 'em, I ain't no blinking freight elevator, mate," it recounted to Silvera as they rose slowly upward. "I'm used ter hauling up the greats and near-greats of the literary world, but it ain't my idea of high-class work to lift books up and down. So I tells 'em, maybe they'll have to be up and ... here's your floor, sir."

"What you need is a union," Silvera suggested, stepping out, "or a guild at least."

A robot identical to the one downstairs greeted him in the 6th-level reception pit. "Good afternoon, Mr. Silvera ... or do you prefer to be addressed as Miss X?"

"Silvera is fine."

"Mr. Silvera, then, walk down corridor 5. The EdCom is awaiting your visit, anticipating it with keen ...."

The long yellow corridor was lined with large Assassin Family posters. There was Pop Blunt, Mom Blunt, Junior Blunt, Sis Blunt — posed together, and singly, killing various enemies of decent society.

"I better see if I can get a piece of the poster money in my contract," he said to himself.

The EdCom door swung open before he reached it.

"Welcome, Mr. Silvera," called a deep, pleasant voice.

Seated around a circular table were an android, a robot and a portable computer. There was one extra chair.

Silvera took it, facing the three machines. "Gentlemen," he said. "I understand you need someone to write a few Assassin Family books."

"No longer." The smiling android had been built to resemble a handsome blond man in his late twenties. He was dressed in a two-piece nearsilk bizsuit. "We have found him in you, Joe."

"Here, here," said the robot, who looked very much like the other two Silvera had encountered.

"Chug wuff," said the computer in a gravely voice. A streamer of green tape came spinning out of a slot in his front.

The android, grinning, tore off the streamer. "Yes, Joe, here are the latest sales figures on *I Slept with a Watermelon*. They've very good, very good. Tinker & Associates is going to have to go into another printing."

"What are the exact figures?"

"Your hardcover publisher will

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be getting a statement soon." The android stuffed the crumpled tape into another slot in the computer.

"Chuff munch chompchomp."

"You're familiar, I believe, with the Assassin Family series," contunied the android. "This isn't simply, Joe, one more series of books about senseless killing. We wouldn't want, with all the dreadful attempts being made on our own King Billy's life, to encourage brutality and murder. It's true, Mom Blunt, Pop Blunt, Junior Blunt and Sis Blunt are political assassins. However, the important thing the reader, especially the younger reader, learns from the novels is how important it is for every member of the family to get along. The Assassin Family doesn't just share a profession, they share a warm feeling of —"

"I wrote four books in the series already," cut in Silvera. "Ghosted them for Art Hammocker. In fact —"

"Which titles?" inquired the handsome android.

"*The Flaming Death Slaughter, The Dead Lizard Slaughter, The Invisible Missile Slaughter,* and *The Aluminum Nun Slaughter.*"

"Grunt grunt chug chug snaff," said the computer as it produced another swirl of green tape.

The android consulted the new tape. "Those titles have all done extremely well, Joe, extremely."

"Specifically?"

"You'll have to ask Art for a look at his royalty statements."

"I'd like very much to do that. Would you have any idea where he is?"

The robot said, "None."

"It's as though he's been swallowed up," said the android. "A brilliant writer, as you, being his friend, no doubt know. We're all saddened by his departure, saddened and disturbed."

"Clung clung urff cham," said the computer. A sheet of purple faxpaper popped out of his middle.

After taking the sheet, the android said, "My colleague reminds me the deadline for the next Assassin Family book is nearly upon us. We'd like to sign you up to do it and one more, Joe. We'll say $4000 each."

"$5000," he said.

"Chug chug werf bam," said the computer.

"Okay, Joe, $5000, in the light of your impressive sales record."

"And I'd like a percentage of any poster money."

"That will be difficult, Joe," said the android, a trace of sadness in his voice. "As you know, Tinker & Associates is merely a subsidiary of a larger, human-owned Barnum System company. We, mere machines, have a certain autonomy, but when it comes to contract modifications, we'd have to —"

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"Skip the poster rights," said Silvera. "Draw up a contract."

"Chum chug unk." Four copies of a two-book contract came popping out of a slot in the computer's backside.

"There's supposedly an outline that Art submitted on this next book in the series," said Silvera. "Since you guys already okayed it, I can save some time by —"

"Scratch," said the robot.

"Yes, Joe, we've decided you'd better start from scratch," the android told him. "We'd like you to come up with a brand-new outline."

"Chung wuff."

"Yes, make it something as strong as *The Invisible Missile Slaughter* if you can."

"I can." Silvera took the contracts the android handed him and began reading over the top copy. "Might I at least get a look at Art's outline, to see what I have to avoid?"

"That's probably filed down in Literary," explained the android, "and to locate it might take several days or —"

"Okay. I don't have to see it." Silvera began signing the copies of the contract.

The night wind was burnishing the seeout dome of Mini's tower bedroom. Snowflakes spun round in the blackness, slapping at the oval panels of neoglass.

"Life in the literary game is surely unpredictable," remarked Mini as she ran her hand over his tangle of honey-hued hair. "This morning I was trying to fight off a sexual assault by polar bears, and tonight I'm in bed with one of the most prolific freelance writers in the universe."

"The wheel of fortune takes some strange spins." Silvera was flat on his back on her oval floating bed, watching the smooth bare back of the girl seated beside him.

"I feel somewhat abandoned," decided Mini. "Like the woman in that awful book *I Slept with a Watermelon.*"

"No literary criticism. I wrote that book."

"You? Oh Joe, that's distressing. I read one of the Assassin Family books you ghosted for poor vanished Mr. Hammocker, read it this afternoon. There are definite traces of literary ability in there. I realized you have to write a certain way for the dimbulbs who buy the series, yet you couldn't hide a real flare for imagery and a deft —"

"No literary criticism," he repeated.

Mini sighed. "This has been a very odd day, even for Jelado Territory," she said, hugging her knees. "The police, I called them right after you left, claim those dreadful polar-bear men left not so

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much as a paw print. Then they asked me to look through a big book full of mugshots of polar bears. I can't remember much what they looked like, except one maybe wore glasses. It's all very ... well, odd."

"Do you," Silvera asked of the naked literary agent, "remember anything about Art's outline for the new book?"

"No, I don't believe so, Joe." She bit at her lower lip. "I don't even read them anymore, the outlines. There's too much violence abroad these days. All these Assassination Fandom people trying to knock off King Billy and .... Hey, I do remember Art's title. It was *The Death Engine Slaughter.*"

"Doesn't give much clue as to what it's about."

"Is that important?"

"The polar-bear lads swiped your copy; the EdCom at Tinker & Associates won't let me see their copy," he said. "Yeah, it could be important. May even help me find Art if I can get a look at a copy."

Mini brightened. "I wonder if Dynamo can help you."

"Dynamo?"

"He a cyborg, a rather odd fellow who lives over in the Lower Class 2 sector of the city," replied the girl. "Mr. Hammocker didn't like people to know about Dynamo, never let Tinker & Associates find out."

"What is he, another ghost?"

"Not exactly. Mr. Hammocker often based his novels in this series on real incidents, real espionage situations," she said. "Dynamo runs a sort of research service, uses a lot of rebuilt computers and such. He was, I know, helping Mr. Hammocker on *The Death En* —"

Buzz! Buzz!

"... *gine Slaughter.* Be, I bet, a good idea to —"

Buzz! Buzz!

"Phone," mentioned Silvera.

Buzz! Buzz!

"I'm practicing calm and tranquility, part of which involves ignoring the phone when I'm not in the mood to answer."

"You ought to shut it off then."

"No, I might miss an important call. Oh, crap!" She swung her long smooth legs off the bed, went running across the tower room to the pixphone alcove.

Silvera remained on his back, hands locked behind his head. The snow continued heavy.

"Joe," Mini called after a moment, "it's for you."

"Who is it?"

"The king," she answered.

"How'd you like having them print such shrabish stuff about you?" inquired the balding catman.

"In my line," answered Silvera, "any sort of publicity is a help."

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"The *Kill King Billy Monthly*?" said the ruler of Jelado Territory, whacking his furry palm with the cheaply printed magazine. "I wager you wouldn't think a *Kill King Billy Monthly* was such a hot ticket. And this is only one of their darned fanzines. Assassin Fandom has a dozen of them at least. They print drawings of me with big Xs marking all my vital spots; they run detailed diagrams of my sleeping chamber; they feature scholarly articles on how to construct bombs to hurl at me when I venture out in public." With a growl, King Billy hurled the fanzine at a window of the throne room.

An armed guard out on the snowswept morning balcony spun, gun in hand. Seeing nothing unusual, he returned to watching the courtyard below.

"They vote on the best amateur assassin of the month, the shrab who comes closest to knocking me off," continued the unsettled monarch. "Give him a doggone loving cup. They even hold banquets and conventions, all clandestine and underground. Boy, would I love to crash one of their conventions. I'd show them who's going to assassinate who."

"Maybe that's what they want," suggested Silvera, "to lure you out in the open."

"It could be. I have stayed pretty much indoors, ever since Assassination Fandom got rolling last year."

"Why did you want to see me this morning, your majesty?"

"I'm a great admirer of your work, for one thing," said King Billy. "Some of your political figures, most of them I'd wager, are not intellectual at all. Books play no part in their lives. That's the big reason, one of them anyhow, the universe is so screwed up. I, on the other hand, am often found with my snoot in a book. I read that whole series of Machinery Twins books you did, Joe, and your adventure novels about Wolfpit Spanner. When I learned you also wrote under various pen names, I had Erasmus get me a complete list of what you'd done under all your names. Do you realize it runs to 856 titles?"

"932."

"Really?" The king crossed to a dangling bell pull over his throne. "I better tell Erasmus this."

A moment later an android came shuffling into the room. He was tinted green and had crinkly orange hair. "Yassuh, boss?"

"He's supposed to be an Earth System Negro but they got the colors wrong," said King Billy. "Been with our family ever since I was a boy and my late father, King Eddie, ruled the land."

"You done runged de bell, sar?"

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"Erasmus, this is Jose Silvera."

"Oh, my, lawdy me. Bless my soul." The green andy came shuffling over and caught Silvera's hand. "Lemme kiss dem fingers what have writ sech fine books and —"

"That's okay." Silvera pulled free.

"Jose informs me, Erasmus, that he's written 932 books under his assortment of names. You'd better get to overhauling your list."

"Why, dadgum, I specs I'se better," said the android. "Nice ter huv metted wif you, marse Silvera." He tottered out of the room.

"Nice old fellow," said King Billy.

"Was there any other reason you wanted to see me?"

"Doggoned if there isn't, Jose." The king returned to his throne and sat uneasily upon it. "I want to start a fanzine of my own."

"Oh, so?"

"Fight fire with fire, as you writers might phrase it," said the king as he rubbed at his cheek whiskers. "I want to start an anti-assassination fanzine, call the thing something like the *King Billy's Not Such a Bad Guy Magazine*. We can polish the title."

"You want me to write it?"

"Write it, edit it. We'll pay you handsomely."

"There may be a simpler solution."

"What?"

Silvera said, "We'll have to clean out all the assassins."

Sleet came scraping and slashing down across the late afternoon. The icy wind worried at Silvera as he made his way through the assortment of people spilled on the narrow snowy street. There was a moaning lizard man with a bandaged head, a one-legged catman spread-eagled on his back, a score of other injured people.

Up ahead, a plump woman in a checkerboard rain poncho, a basket under her arm, was moving among the injured. "Good afternoon, and how are you?" she was asking a black man with a broken arm.

"Take a leap for yourself, lady."

"Yes, I can understand your being cranky." She smiled understandingly. "Conditions in St. Barney's Lower Class Hospital aren't the best. I'm sure, though, you'll be getting inside in another day or so."

"Bullshit, lady."

"At any rate, would you like an apple, a pear, or xik or a blue banana?"

"I tell you where you can put the latter, lady."

Silvera slowed when he was opposite the woman. "Some kind of accident? Can I help?"

"You're offplanet obviously," said the amiable woman. "This is merely a regular overcrowded day

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at St. Barney's Lower Class Hospital. You could help by donating to the building fund."

"Soon as I collect from Hammocker." Silvera continued on, leaving the overflow patients behind.

Down another twisting lane, through an alley, and he reached the address Mini had provided. The door on the dark stone building was of realwood, many times painted. Beneath the knocker was a loose nameplate reading *Dynamo*. Silvera used the knocker, waited, used it again.

"Come in, hurry up," beckoned a voice on the inside. "I hope you're a doctor."

Silvera pushed the door open. Dynamo's office was long and narrow, jammed and crammed with secondhand computers, date machines, file robots.

"He's over there, over there against the wall. Hurry up, hurry up." It was a much-dented old computer talking to him, the same voice which had invited Silvera in.

He found the little cyborg crumpled in a shadowy corner. There was a chunk out of the window above the man's head, and sleet was insinuating itself in and spotting the cyborg's close-cropped head. "Dynamo?" Silvera knelt beside him.

"They ... worked ... over."

"Who?"

"Bunch of ... polar bears."

"They weren't supposed to know about you, that you'd been helping Art Hammocker with his research."

"... must have known ..."

"If you aren't a doctor, you better call one," urged the old computer. "Not that St. Barney's is likely to send anybody in under a week."

"I'll get a doctor here." Silvera started to rise.

"Unscrew," murmured the beaten cyborg.

"Huh? Is that some local insult?"

"Unscrew my right hand," said Dynamo. "Keep the Hammocker stuff in there ... they couldn't get it out of ... me."

"He's pretty spunky," said the old computer, "considering he's only part machine."

Inside a hollow compartment of the metal hand was a spool of memory tape.

"How long you been an assy?"

"Beg pardon?"

The birdman clicked his beak, little orange eyes scrutinizing Silvera. "An assy, an Assassination Fandom enthusiast. Don't you even know the lingo? Say, what's your —"

"Whoa, now." Silver caught the man's feathered right hand before it could reach his underwing

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holster. "This is my first convention. I'm a newcomer to assassination."

"You could be a royal spy. You might be a media rascal. You —"

"Nice meeting you." Silvera squeezed the suspicious birdman's gun hand hard enough to incapacitate it for a few minutes, then pushed further into the underground crowd.

Several hundred assassination fans were in the vast stone room. The room also held display booths, sales tables and refreshment stands.

"Get your Kill Billy Kits here," shouted a plump catwoman in a sarong and gunbelt. "Floor plans of the palace, guard rosters ..."

"New bio of Elroy Stebbins, the most successful near-miss assassin so far," offered twin goatmen from their booth.

"Isn't it explosive?" asked a fifteen-year-old girl with a rifle strapped to her slim back.

"What?"

"The whole thing, the ambience, the tensions. It's percussive." She rubbed her small pointed breasts against his arm. "And best of all is the GOH."

"That would be the Guest Of Honor?"

"How long have you been an assy?" The girl withdrew her breasts and wrinkled her freckled nose.

"The Guest Of Honor is Art Hammocker, isn't it?"

"Yes, exactly! Isn't that bombastic?"

"Is indeed. Have you met him yet?"

"Yes, I have, but don't tell." She licked her lips. "They don't want too many people to see him until the banquet later this evening," the girl said. "Imagine! He's the sole author of all those wonderful Assassin Family books. A true celebrity. I'm still not sure how they persuaded him to appear."

"It's called kidnapping."

"Huh?"

Silvera said, "Where is he exactly?"

"Really, I shouldn't tell."

"I'm probably the most enthusiastic Art Hammocker fan in the whole universe. I can't wait to see him."

"I sort of know one of the security guards. His name is Bluey. They call him that because of his blue —"

"If I mention your name, would Bluey let me in for a look?"

"He might. My name is Trix."

"Where've they got Hammocker?"

"Go along that corridor over there, right by the groutburger stand and the King Billy dartgame. You might want to see the Kill Billy art show first, in a suite near —"

"I'm too eager to meet the

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author of the Assassin Family stories."

After smiling at Trix, Silvera nudged his way through the clutter of fans.

"Kill' Billy balloons! Pop 'em, poke 'em, shoot 'em! Fun for all!"

"King Billy calendars! Half price."

Bluey was a blue-haired youth. He held a black pistol in each fist. "You dipping Trix or what?"

"An old family friend," Silvera told him.

"You're not dipping her? I never seen her do any favors for nobody who wasn't dipping her." Bluey shrugged. "Okay, you can look at him for a minute. Don't pay attention to any crazy stuff he says. He's really here of his own free will." Thrusting a pistol into his armpit, Bluey opened the heavy door.

"They're holding me ... oh, what a percussive situation!" Hammocker recognized Silvera.

"I'm going to rescue you," Silvera said after the door shut.

Hammocker was a small man of fifty, restless. He was pacing the bare room, hopping, skipping, jigging. "What an explosive time I've had, Joe." He waltzed for a few seconds. "These kids have been holding me for a week in their underground hideouts. They tell me I'm their Guest Of Honor, which is flattering ... to have someone recognize you for the fulminating writer you are is —"

"Before I rescue you, however," interrupted Silvera, "I want you to —"

"Joe, I know I owe you a few bucks, but —"

"$5000." From an inner pocket Silvera took out a check. "I want you to sign this Tinker & Associates check over to me. It's for $5000, your latest on-signing money. It's been sitting at Scott-Marryat."

"Can't do that, Joe. That entire sum is going into a retirement plan I've worked —"

"Sign it over. Then we've got to get to the all-night bank in the capital before midnight."

"The bank stays open the whole night."

"Yeah, but Tinker & Associates is going to collapse shortly before dawn."

"You found out about that, I see."

"From Dynamo. He's been doing more digging since you vanished."

"What a bombilating setup." The small author skipped and hopped. "The thing is, Joe, I only had part of the facts when I did my outline. Tinker & Associates realized if I did the book I'd probably find out everything." He jigged, shadowboxed, spun. "I'd been hearing rumors for a couple months that all this Assassination Fandom

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business was a cover, financed by somebody else as a diversion. Then, with Dynamo helping dig with all his unorthodox machines and methods, I got the lead that there was a conspiracy among the androids and robots in Jelado to take over the territory. Why they want such a cold damn place is beyond me. If I didn't have to work here, I'd .... At any rate, that's about all I had when I did my outline. How ironic that I submitted the palpitating thing to T&A."

"They're the masterminds behind the whole plot," said Silvera. "The Tinker & Associates android, robot and computer planned to knock off King Billy and seize control of Jelado. While all the palace guards and security police were guarding the outside and hunting the Lower Class sectors for Assassination Fandom people, their agent would strike from right inside the palace. Biding his time, waiting for the right diversion."

"Why, that has to be —"

"Erasmus, the old family android."

"That's percussive."

As the restless Hammocker ran by him, Silvera caught his arm. "They had these people keep you quiet till they made their move."

"I have the feeling I wasn't meant to get out of this at all."

"Might be. Now sign the damn check over."

"How you going to get me out of this place?"

"Dynamo got hold of the floor plans of this consite," Silvera explained. "He couldn't learn exactly where they were keeping you, but he got the location of all the exits and entrances. There's one five doors down the corridor."

"Okay, Joe, okay. You've got me." Hammocker tugged out his electric pen. "The Assassin Family is mine, you know. Idea, concept, format. See, you came along after I'd been suffering from writer's block and take —"

"Writer's block? You were putting the boots to that telekinesis heiress from Murdstone. Sign."

"Pay to the order of Jose Silvera. (Signed) Arthur M. Hammocker. How do you know they haven't already stopped payment on this?"

"They haven't. One of Dynamo's computers found out from T&A's bank. They probably figured that would be too obvious, give away their part in your disappearance."

Hammocker, after blowing on his signature, handed the check to the big writer. "Imagine all these Assassination Fandom people being dupes."

Silvera tucked the check away, crossed to the door and yanked it open. "Hey, Bluey, tell Trix to get in here."

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"Huh?"

"I decided I may as well dip her after all."

"Why you no-account scoundrel!" Bluey, one gun in each hand, came charging into the room. "I'm going to ... oof!"

Silvera had booted him in the stomach. While the young man doubled up, Silvera chopped the guns away from him. Then he knocked him down. "Truss him up and gag him," he ordered Hammocker.

"You sure don't," observed Hammocker, "fight fair."

Silvera said, "I'm a freelance writer, remember?"

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I first became aware of Leigh Brackett as a byline sometime in the early 1940s — no later than 1942. By then, I was living on the chicken farm and my days were full. But once a year I got to New York City and there, at a corner newsstand on Columbus Avenue and 77th Street, I found both Brackett and *Planet Stories*.

There is no way to describe that impact to anyone much younger than 45. In 1943, the pulps began to die of paper starvation, and immediately after the War television killed them with imitation, which is of course the sincerest form of flattery. But into the spring of 1942 it was still possible to find on many street corners a booth from which gnarled old men in caps, and immensely fat women in house dresses, sold newspapers and magazines. They were open, first of all, all day, every day, in cities with populations as low as ten or fifteen thousand. They operated, second of all, *in addition to* the more formal neighborhood cigar store with its magazine rack and its piles of newspapers and racing forms; there was one of those stores every two or three blocks, and sometimes on all four corners of a busy intersection. The sidewalk stands, spaced almost as thickly, filled in the blanks between stores. Sometimes they

ALGIS BUDRYS

Books

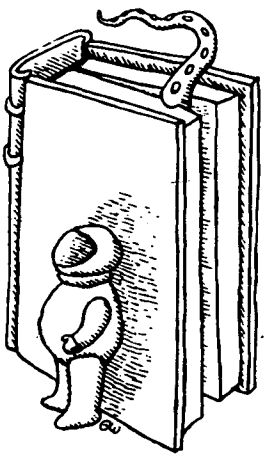
The Best of Leigh Brackett, Edmond Hamilton, Ed., Ballantine, $1.95

Cirque, Terry Carr, Bobbs-Merrill, $8.95

Hunter of Worlds, C.J. Cherryh, SF Book Club, $2.49

The John McPhee Reader, William L. Howarth, Ed., Vintage Books, $3.95

Unearth, Ostrowsky-Lantz and Landsberg, Editors, Unearth Publications, $1.00



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operated right out front.

Third of all, they were shingled — I mean, they were overlapped, sided, arrayed, embossed, panoplied, costumed, bedecked and in many cases roofed — in pulp magazines of every conceivable kind. There were crime pulps, sports pulps, air war pulps, western pulps, and here in one corner, SF pulps. There were 'tec crime pulps, violent crime pulps, spicy crime pulps, and The Shadow. There were straight aviation pulps, and then there were G8 and his Battle Aces, and Terence X. O'Leary borderline SF pulps, featuring such devices as the Kaiser's land aircraft carrier, or dogfights in which biplane P6E's mounted disintegrator cannon. There were western adventure pulps, and there were western romance pulps. There were jungle adventure pulps, and Doc Savage. And while some of them published as infrequently as bi-monthly, the greater number were at least monthly; some were bi-weekly. A couple of ranch romance magazines, directly fore-running the Harlequin formula, were weekly.

If you were not there, you will never believe it no matter what I tell you. But the fact is that hardly anyone living in any community with sidewalks was ever more than fifteen cents and a brief stroll away from this gimcrack rainbow. Even out in the sticks, every general store carried a representative selection.

They were hardly respectable. Inside, the text and illustrations were encoded in kerosene ink banged onto lightweight woodpulp from skewed plates made by failed apprentices.* The press sheets were gathered, folded and stapled, and sawn, not cut, through the top fold. Their covers were splashed with color — four-color in the hey days, three-color toward the end. That wonderful cheap magenta and sky blue, combined with an eye-searing yellow, made up into tomato reds, mulberry purples, and a technically unsuccessful green which nevertheless happened to be particularly suitable for frogs, toads, and thus that situation in which the seminude young lady† attracts the attention of something large and wet, to the hero's dismay.

Pulp prurience was a peculiar, complex, and I think innocent

One plant to my knowledge sent its plates out to an auto chrome shop. They went into the vats along with headlight bezels, door handles and bumper guards, emerging hardened with a quick dip of nickel. Thus far more durable, they were just a hair short of legible.

†*There were two of them, actually. One was a manicurist in Akron, and the other a volunteer hotel employee in Baltimore. They had the same body, but somewhat different expressions, since the manicurist was made of wax.*

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thing. To the uninitiate, snatching one gulp of a glance while firmly buying *just* the racing form, it must have seemed obvious what was to be found depicted in the text. But what was to be found in the text had to be something that would appeal equally to an adult — supposedly male, not too well educated, a little on the downhill side of life, probably always a little depressed — and me, the eleven-year-old.

I think the sexual referent we're looking for is "voyeurism," that pale, passive quasi-sexuality. A lot of things about voyeurism have absolutely nothing to do with reproducing the species, and I think it was clear as crystal to most of us why the octopoid creature from Deneb wanted the switchboard lady. But I'm sure all that was just the come-on. The appeal to the pre-pubescent or the post-Depressive libido is of short duration. I think the people who react quickly to a glimpse of pink lace at the neckline, or to a strapless spacesuit, are people who need at least one thing more than sex, and still have some hope they could handle it if it arrived. That thing is optimism, and that is what the pulps had for sale, disguised as decisive action and glamorous setting.

And of all the pulp writers SF had, there is no question who was the best, who had worked the tradition down to its essentials, polished it up, infused it with intelligent creativity, and given it its own sort of poetry in place of mawkishness. That would be Leigh Brackett. Catherine Moore was the queen of sword-and-sorcery. Ray Bradbury — who studied Brackett perhaps just as carefully as he studied Sturgeon — was the soon-to-be Rod McKuen of science fiction. Emmett McDowell succeeded Albert De Pina as *Planet's* master of the interplanetary action adventure. There were plenty of skilled hands contributing to *Planet* and to its rivals, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Startling Stories,* and meeting the highest critical demands of their readership. But Leigh was the best then, and she is the best now.

She can write almost anything, I guess. Certainly, the range of what she has published in the SF media is stunningly wide, as *The Best of Leigh Brackett* convincingly indicates. She has also had a long career in Hollywood, polishing up the work of such as William Faulkner and Raymond Chandler, doing original screenplays from scratch, serving the talents of Bogart, Wayne, and Ricky Nelson. But by choice and by preference, I deduce, she writes of the science fantasy universe; that place, dim and a little faded now except when she publishes the next Stark novel, of

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ruined cities and whispering traditions flickering across the campfire on desert somewhere under no Moon of Earth's.

It's a wonderful universe. You may think it laden with cliches, which it was, but they are not the cliches you think of. David Heath, protagonist of "The Moon that Vanished," is hardly the mighty-thewed adventurer. Ciaran isn't, and Mouse keeps him honest, which may be more than he can do for her. Eric John Stark is of course aptly named, but in "Enchantress of Venus"* you will also find the ocean of breathable gas, and the drowned city where slaves pull aside the wreckage of the only ruined building. Elsewhere on Venus you will encounter the flower girl. In "The Veil of Astellar" you will notice, compressed, the situation for a powerful SF novel of the first class.

These are the things of poetry, of storytelling on a level that transcends its medium, of an imagination so rich and yet so disciplined that it requires notice even in a genre where that is supposed to be part of the basic kit you bring into the league with you. But the writer who can create the city of Shandakor, *and* the story of her kind of John Carter of Mars, *and* the milieu as well as the premise of "The Tweener" ... that is not someone to dismiss for writing breastplate adventure.

In his introduction to this book, her late husband, Edmond Hamilton, gives us just a few glimpses of Leigh Brackett the person. She is a child on the beaches of Southern California, probably already coping with the fact that there is a topflight synthesizing mechanism in her brain. Then she is one of a pair of writers in a foothill farmhouse in the eastern marches of Ohio, coping with sagging floors and blistered paint, scything the overgrown lawn.

It is not glimpse enough. This is a marvelous person. Someone with a tape recorder and good sense should get to her and just listen, listen for however long it takes.

Cirque is Terry Carr's first novel, and it is the novel a lifelong science fiction fan would write. It has in it the city of Cirque, Earth's last graceful metropolis in a decadent time, and beside Cirque it has the Pit, into which flows the River

**I would guess about half these titles were imposed by* Planet *editors in search of grabbers for the cover lines. "The Moon that Vanished" is incidental to the story, as is "Enchantress." Where the titles are evocative but cryptic — "The Jewel of Bas," "The Veil of Astellar" — I assume they are original. Where they are naively melodramatic, I assume the hand of Wilbur S. Peacock or Chester Whitehorn guided by the precepts of Malcolm Reiss.*

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Fundament, and into which Cirque has cast its offal for uncounted generations, confident that the pit is bottomless. But some say the Beast lives in the pit, and may emerge.

It has richly elaborated characters — a fire sculptor, a girl who takes a drug which progresses her through all her personalities within a single day, a millipede from a race which sees its entire life ahead of it as surely as you or I see our past, a child, a priestess, and finally a Beast. And all this is woven skillfully, as if from a chart, into an intertwined narrative which makes a number of attractive points about the nature of perception and the universality of decency in all living things.

Still, it's not more than the sum of its parts. Carr, an editor of considerable acumen and experience, and a short story writer of some power, may be a victim of his expertise and his intelligence. There is everything here that could make a major story, and then there is one thing more, and that one thing pales the rest. Detachment. In a field full of naively bad novels by people who discovered SF yesterday, Carr has written a mediocre one by being too smart to fall under his own spell.

C.J. Cherryh is now reaping the benefit of having been overpraised and overweighted with attention. *Hunter of Worlds* has elaborated on all her hitherto minor faults. It's as interesting a story as it is only because of her considerable raw talent, and the resourcefulness of an imagination equal to the young Brackett's. Meanwhile, however, it imposes an enormous burden on the reader, who really ought to take notes on the languages Cherryh invents, and make a genealogical chart on which to follow the elaborate politics played out among nonhuman beings from social systems with which no 20th century occidental reader can empathize.

Hunter is an elaborate construction, couched in excellent prose and set on breathtaking stages, in which is played out an old family feud of the enigmatic star-ruling Iduve race. To track down the feared and hated Tejef, Chimele, ruler of the vessel/clan *Ashanome*, melds the minds of Aiela Lyailleue, the young Kallian spaceman, and Daniel, the insane captive human, and Isande, the Killian girl who has never been out of service to the Iduve.

This combination somehow aids Chimele in tracking down Tejef on the planet Priamos. But I will be damned if I understand exactly how, and as the story advanced it became increasingly difficult to puzzle out who was doing what to whom. And that is only in part

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because of passages like this:

"I perceive otherwise. I perceive that you are not *takkhe* with us in the matter of Tejef, that someone lends him support."

"Then you perceive amiss. My *m'melakhia* has always been for the well-being of *Ashanome.* We have been able to compose our differences before, *Nasith-tak.*"

Passages like that reflect a private vision so elaborately worked out that, even with the glossary added to the book by the author, the reader is left behind, in a cloud of concepts in which *takkhe* is something not much like sympathy, and *m'melakhia* (a prerequisite for achieving *arastiethe*) is sometimes translatable as "love" and sometimes as "ferocity."

But Cherryh's chronic problem has been an inability to close with the crucial scene. In the much-praised *Brothers of Earth,* she persistently had the crucial action happen offstage, except in cases where it happened on-stage but she did not say so, leaving it for the reader to deduce why everyone's attitude had suddenly changed. In *Gate of Ivrel,* in which she used invented language sparingly to good effect, she had usually avoided describing interaction ... a curious flaw in a broadsword action story.

In other words, someone who showed great promise with her first novel, but needed a clearer understanding of how storytelling works, has now progressed into incomprehensibility in just three books. I blame the people who devoted so many paragraphs to telling her she was without flaw. And I am stunned at this oversight on the part of Don Wollheim, who discovered her, is her primary publisher in DAW Books form, and is a crackerjack editor. Wollheim, of course, also let Philip K. Dick fly into his own navel, to consequent critical plaudits and a bitter wonderment as to why his books don't sell. Perhaps Wollheim has no feeling on the matter, being able to rest reasonably confident that a good new talent comes along quite frequently for him to find. Perhaps it's just as well Mal Reiss found Leigh Brackett. Who can tell? But if Cherryh finds herself one day writing entirely to herself, supported only by a small cult of people who dig that sort of thing, and comforted by notices claiming that if only the readers weren't so stupid, she'd be enjoying the fruits she deserves for her intelligence and creativity, it will be too damned bad. Intelligence and creativity are not what readers want. What readers want is the *result,* and I commend you to Brackett.

John McPhee. John McPhee. Vintage has now brought out in

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nearly 400 pages *The John McPhee Reader* at just about a penny a page. Throwing away the preciosity of editor William Howarth's prose — it must be a funny feeling, writing like McPhee and being worshipped by someone who writes like Howarth — one retains excerpts from such books as *The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed* and *The Curve of Binding Energy*. These are required reading for SF writers and fans of the SF frame of mind. Then there are such other magnificent reportages as "The Survival of the Bark Canoe," "Travels in Georgia," and "The Pine Barrens."

McPhee writes for *The New Yorker*, and as near as I can make out, he writes about whatever he pleases. First he goes and looks at something, and then he lives in it for a while, and then he comes back out, to make the incredible as natural as hope, and the bizarre as logical as breathing. There is no finer contemporary observer. And, in our context, there is no one like him who can report on the things of this Earth and display so pellucidly that most of us are failures at describing the richness of our own created other worlds.

Send a dollar to *Unearth*, Suite 190, 102 Charles St., Boston, MA 02114, and you will get back a copy of a magazine full of amateur SF. *Unearth's* premise is that it can find readers for first sales by hitherto unpublished SF writers. If you are interested in becoming an SF writer yourself, or if you are a student of such things, you and *Unearth* will get along quite well.

In addition to the stories, which are frequently interesting, there are other features to appeal to the would-be writer; a column by Hal Clement on science for the SF writer, and a column on writing by Harlan Ellison. Each issue of this quarterly also features a reprint of the first story ever sold by someone who is now a heavy name in the field. In my case, I weigh well over 250 and them's my basic credentials, but *Unearth* has also done Clement's and Ellison's first stories, and is planning examples from Spinrad, Knight, Wilhelm, Malzberg and Zelazny. I have found something useful in the Clement column, and much to admire in the Ellison. I have even liked one of the stories — "Locksmith and Master of Love," by Toby Perkins — well enough to wonder if he sent it around the market before it was seen by *Unearth's* editors. Some of these authors will in due course be turning up elsewhere. I wish them well in walking the sometimes very strait way from being a gifted amateur to being a professional.

But in any event, I recommend this investment to those of you who would like to walk it with them.

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This story about an extraordinary woman and some strange alien insects is part of a fine series (e.g., "Catapult to the Stars," April 1977) by Michael Coney which takes place in the exotic place known as The Peninsula.

Sparklebugs, Holly and Love

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

There is a shock which comes slowly, when the mind will not accept the message from the eyes.

And there is an innocence about a clear blue sky, a thing so tranquil and free from the machineries of civilization that it plays a lullaby to that same mind.

Put these two things together. Imagine a crowd of people — around five hundred people — standing on a warm windless day and watching that sky and seeing something happen slowly and terribly, so that they don't believe it until that sky delivers its message to them personally, in little pieces, such as a Halloween mask, such as a child's doll, such as a severed arm.

The anatomy of a human disaster. We watched the shuttle descending at Sentry Down spaceport, and we — all of us — refused to believe that it was coming down too fast. That the antigrav mechanisms had failed and that still-far-off blob was hurtling towards us out of control. We might have been mistaken, and we didn't want to start screaming too soon. Beside me a woman was saying too brightly, too casually:

"I haven't seen Steve for eight years, can you believe that?"

Far off, a hooter sounded. Blocky red vehicles sidled out of sheds.

Now someone screamed. The woman beside me said, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God," over and over. She wasn't praying. She was acknowledging the purport of that scream. A communal babbling arose.

The shuttles had been coming and going for hours in their eerie silence, ferrying passengers and freight between this hot platform of concrete and the starship *Hetherington Venturer*, which orbited out there, a secret of the blue sky.

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But the tumbling triangular shape was no secret. It seemed to be dropping vertically towards the public observation enclosure, and now people were beginning to run aimlessly in all directions. A man thumped into me, and I took my gaze away from the sky, but he was gone, mumbling something mindless. A number of people seemed to be fighting, but in retrospect I think they had simply collided and were unwilling to change course; panic does funny things to people. I didn't panic but this is no credit to me; I was too numbed for quick action. I looked back at the sky.

It was empty.

At the same instant the earth erupted nearby as the shuttle, a thing of hugeness and complexity with a payload of nine hundred people and countless items of freight, smashed into the concrete landing pad after a free fall of one kilometer.

Afterwards, the images of such events became fragmented by shock. I remember the fire engines moving in, then waiting, purposelessly, because there was no fire. Ambulances stood still because there were no living. The center of impact was a quarter kilometer away, but the wreckage extended to within fifty meters of the enclosure gates. The wreckage consisted of small items which I am trying to forget. I remember afterwards drinking in the spaceport bar with a middle-aged woman who was not crying and who kept telling me that Bart was coming on a later shuttle. She said this over and over, while the speaker system recited an endless passenger list, and one of the names made her eyes go dead.

And, outside, the shuttles continued to land and take off — but from an alternative pad, as though the authorities had always planned for this eventuality.

Maybe the most horrible — I remember the Barrelorgans. The big truck from the Organ Pool rolled up, and the rear doors opened, and overalled men came running down the ramp wheeling the machines before them. They scuttled across the concrete like scavenging crabs, stopping beside inert pieces of humanity and loaded them quickly into the drum-shaped containers. Every minute counted. When each Barrelorgan was full, they dogged the lid down and pressed a button, and we heard the hiss as air was evacuated and the contents were quick-frozen. Then the man would come running back to the truck, load the full Barrelorgan on board and emerge with another empty one. In a way it was not very efficient, but an accident of this magnitude doesn't happen often. The men rushed to and fro, saving human remains for future use as organ transplants, limb

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grafts. The Barrelorgans were bright red drums mounted on wheeled boxes. From a distance they looked like childs' toys.

Much later I remembered my own mission. I picked up the small parcel of Sparklebugs from the freight office and felt guilty that I had not suffered loss in any way whatsoever.

Then I caught the hoverferry home.

Some gregarious alien races do not distinguish between loneliness and solitude in their vocabulary. To them, the two are synonymous, equally unpleasant. For me however, solitude is a very necessary thing, a time in which to stop working and fighting and hating, a time to realize the stupidity of expending all that effort, a time to meditate and think about peace and love — and then, refreshed, to get back to the fighting again. For some reason it is impossible to think about peace and love in the company of others — or even in the company of a bottle, because then the meditation becomes jerky and scrambled — so I catch myself sober and alone and think it all out.

There is a beach on the east coast of the Peninsula, long and sandy and all littered with ancient silver logs, and at twilight when the tourists have gone it's a good place.

The sun had dropped below the treetops inland so that the beach was in shadow, but the dying rays still picked out the offshore islands and occasionally glittered starlike from a rising shuttle at Sentry Down, thirty kilometers beyond those islands. I was not quite alone as I walked; half a kilometer away, on a rocky outcropping, I could see a figure standing. Then it jumped down and disappeared, and I was able to think.

Mostly I thought about a girl I'd known called Diane, whose father fished this coast with the aid of a team of dolphins. Diane was gone now to some other world, and I'd never see her again, but it didn't really matter because I'd never been in love with her, or anything like that. Hell, I was old enough to be her father. Occasionally I'd drop by to see Daniel Westaway, her dad, to catch up on the latest news.

So I thought about Diane and how I ought to find some girl to share my life before it was too late; and while I did this, I walked along the logs, trying to jump from one to the next without touching the beach. A man can afford to play childish games when there are no eyewitnesses to recount the aberration to his bank manager.

"Hello."

I stepped quickly down to the sand. A girl stood watching me from the water's edge. I couldn't see her face in the half-light, but

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her hair was fair and wavy, her figure slim in a blue sweater, yellow pants. I mumbled a reply to her greeting.

She approached me. Her footprints trailed off into the dark distance behind her; little puddles at the waves' limit. She was quite small, but certainly no kid. I estimated her age at around twenty-six, now that I could see her face and see the beauty and intelligence there. Some last reflections caught her wide eyes. She said, "Please tell me what you were thinking about."

"Uh .... Some girl, I guess. Nothing in particular." Her eyes searched mine and I felt that I could hold no secrets from her.

"Sit down. I want to talk. Here — this log."

And I found myself sitting beside her. "Listen — how the hell do you know I'm not some kind of sex maniac?" I asked.

"Don't talk like that. Don't spoil it." She sat relaxedly; the log was a huge remnant of some bygone logging operation, and her small feet hardly reached the sand.

So we talked about politics, philosophy and sport while it grew dark and the sea became a warm twinkling under the stars. We discussed religions and the growing menace of land sharks and other pets gone wild, and we lamented the lack of police action. We extrapolated on the latest advances in medical science and planetary colonization, and we argued the prospects of the competitors in the regional sling-gliding championship. It was late October, and an Indian summer was just finished, and it was beginning to get cold.

"Please put your arm around me," she said.

Somehow I knew what she intended: not a prelude to sex, but a communication between two people, just another form of contact besides conversation. I drew her to me, sensing the presence of a loneliness far more intense than mine.

"Tell me about yourself," she said.

I found myself describing my small slithe farm down the coast, where I breed the little reptiles with the emotion-sensitive skins and make novelty clothing out of them.

"You mean you slaughter them for their pelts?"

"No. They shed their skins once a year, like snakes." I felt very glad about that. Lights moved across the water, and the throbbing of an ancient engine came to us. That would be Daniel Westaway monitoring his dolphins; his and mine were the only piston-engined boats on the coast — temperamental artifacts of a long time back.

"Oh, yes. I've seen slitheskin things in the stores," she said. "They're very interesting." She made it sound the truth. "Maybe

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some day I'll drop by your place and see what goes on."

"That would be great. How about tomorrow?" I said — when something happened which was so unexpected, so strange that we both jumped to our feet, the conversation forgotten.

The sea had come alive. A wide, glittering wave swept across the flat water towards us, boiling and phosphorescent. In the darkness it was impossible to estimate its height, rate of approach or even how far away it was; it appeared simply as a wall of cascading silver. In the sudden fear which gripped me I thought of the Western Seaboard slide which — so historians tell us — caused a tsunami over fifty meters high to sweep the coastline, completely inundating the Peninsula. Stepping back, I forgot the log, tumbled backwards over it and smashed my head against something. I lay there half-stunned, waiting for the tidal wave.

Something cold and writhing touched my face, slid away. Suddenly I was bombarded with living, flapping things as I lay there; they were around my head, wriggling over my body. I shuddered with disgust, heard myself yelling as I crawled to my feet. I heard the girl screaming I clambered over the log and stood.

The beach was covered with live fish, flashing and undulating in a silver carpet on the sand, gills pumping as they expired in their thousands.

The girl was making queer little sobbing noises as she stood among them. They slithered under my feet as I stepped to her side. "They're only fish," I said, putting my arm around her shoulders. She was shuddering violently. A dark head appeared from the sea, and I could imagine clever eyes watching us. One of Westaway's dolphins had mistaken his direction and driven a shoal of herring ashore instead of into the lagoon pens further south.

Now the girl had shaken me off and was on her knees among the fish, scooping at them with cupped hands and flinging them back into the shallows. She was still sobbing, talking to the fish too, odd little consolatory babbles as she scooped and threw, scooped and threw. I stood irresolute, half-persuaded to walk quietly away. I was in the presence of something I didn't understand, and the sight of that girl, that shadowy frantic form in the living sea, frightened me. Finally I pulled myself together and gripped her shoulder.

"They're only fish," I said again.

I saw the pale shadow of her face swing towards me, then she jumped to her feet. Slipping, sliding, she began to run untidily up the beach. Soon she was moving

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among the arbutus trees which bordered the beach, a figure half-seen like a deer at sunset.

As I walked home, walked away from the dying fish, I wondered what she was doing here on the Peninsula and what her particular problem was. She'd told me nothing about herself, not even her name.

And two nights later it was Halloween.

The party was held in the sunken garden of The Stars, Carioca Jones' aerial house. When I arrived the bonfire was already throwing dancing shadows among the growing numbers of guests. So, clutching the parcel under my costume, I looked around for my host.

"Carioca will be here in a minute," said a girl with a tray of drinks. I took a glass of something yellow, sighted Doug Marshall and Charles Wentworth throwing driftwood on the fire, and joined them. By now there were about fifty guests present, with already some duplication of costumes — I saw two Harlequins and three Arcadian Mind Things.

"What in hell are you supposed to be?" asked Doug, a Pirate, staring at my crumpled raincoat and bare hairy legs.

"An Indecent Exhibitionist. Listen, what's happened to Carioca? This is her party."

"She's up in The Stars, preparing for her grand entrance, I guess. Don't you have any clothes on under that raincoat, Joe? You must be goddamned cold."

"I've got something for her," I said, glancing up at the huge black rectangle of The Stars, silhouetted against the night sky a hundred meters above our heads. Lights were on, blazing against the darkness. Carioca's house is a converted antigravity wrecking crane, tethered to the earth by a strong steel cable. As a point of interest, the bottom end of the cable is fastened to a huge steel shackle set in the base of a concrete pit. A pack of hungry land sharks, trained to attack on sight, is also kept in that pit. Carioca has her enemies ....

Doug Marshall and Charles Wentworth began setting off a few fireworks to keep people interested. A rocket zoomed into the blackness, exploded in a shower of sparks. "That was a good one," I heard Doug say. "I have a way of setting these things up. The secret is in the trajectory."

Guests gathered around laughing, drinking. An orchestra began to tune up; mournful dissonances providing a counterpoint to the whoosh and crackle of fireworks. "Watch this!" Charles said, touching blue paper with his lighted cigar. "Emerald Fountain." He set

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it on the ground and it began to splutter spitefully.

At that moment I saw the girl.

I grabbed Doug by the arm. "Who's that? That girl, sitting over there!"

He'd been in the process of deriding Charles' constipated Emerald Fountain; now he followed my gaze. "That's Holly Davenport."

"Tell me more about her."

He grinned. "You too, huh? Well, she's twenty-six years old, recently widowed, no kids." His voice was serious, now. "She lost her husband last week — he was a passenger on that shuttle that crashed over at Sentry Down. An old buddy of mine. And Holly .... Well, I guess she's just about the nicest woman I know. Maybe the most beautiful, too."

Holly was sitting on a chair at the far side of the bonfire, and a lot of people were near her, some sitting, some standing. Somehow they seemed to be gathered around her, as though solicitous of her recent tragedy and protective towards her — yet they were laughing.

She was laughing too, watching the antics of Charles, who was brandishing a Wand of Brilliance, stabbing with it at the recalcitrant Emerald Fountain as though involved in an insane fencing bout. The people around Holly laughed when she did, smiled when she did. They watched her face often, both the men and the women. She was heartbreakingly lovely, enjoying the fun like any child who might be present, and she made me feel good just looking at her.

I said, "She seems happy enough right now."

Doug glanced at me as though expecting a hurt. "Yes," he said.

Charles was putting on a show for Holly now, arranging a semicircle of small bright sparklers around her feet. She laughed delightedly as he fumbled frantically with matches, trying to get the last one lit before the first went out. Other people drifted up, bringing chairs and firming them into the soft grass.

I found myself standing next to Ramsbottom, a noisy guy whom I knew as a member of the Peninsula sling-gliding club; he was already half drunk, dressed as a Beefeater. "I've forgotten," he was roaring unhappily. "For Chrissake, Joe — I've already forgotten what the last firework looked like, and it was only *seconds* ago. What's this liquor doing to me? It's destroying my brain, that's what it's doing." He stared up at a receding rocket. I heard Holly laugh at something Doug said. "Is it my eyes?" lamented Ramsbottom. "Or is Carioca Jones' goddamn house swelling up like a pumpkin?"

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"It's coming down to earth," I said.

I could hear the whine of the winch. For safety reasons, the antigrav field of Carioca's house is permanently activated at low power — just enough to keep it aloft. Ascent and descent are achieved by means of a mechanical winch — part of the original crane gear.

A series of sharp reports announced Doug's answer to Charles' sparkler display, and a firework dog began hopping crazily among the guests. It approached Holly, smoking and banging; I listened to her laughing, watched her wide slanting eyes — and knew that everyone else was listening and watching even as I ....

I think it was her simplicity which attracted us all, her naive delight at the pretty, noisy toys around her, her unaffected joy in living for the moment. That, and the knowledge of her tragedy which made us feel protective. It was the same girl I'd met on the beach; the same girl but seen through a different-angle spectroscope — a rosy Holly instead of a blue. In that moment I loved her completely and knew that every guy on that lawn loved her too.

Now the bulk of The Stars intruded, blazing light at the far end of the lawn and rumbling slightly as it bedded down on its concrete plinth, sealing in the land sharks. The jumping dog ran out of gunpowder and fell to its side, in tatters. Doug Marshall, about to light a rocket, paused. The orchestra sprang into prominence, floodlighted against a concrete structure shaped like an oyster shell. The conductor gave a peremptory tap with his baton; people stopped talking, turned to watch. A short roll of drums, a cymbal clash, then the band launched into a spirited version of "Copacabana Girl, Hello." This was Carioca's signature tune, the number which she sang in the original 3V spectacular which had made her name. Forty years ago ....

The door of The Stars swung open and a wedge of crimson light spread towards us across the lawn. Carioca had brought her own red carpet. The music hushed. Then she appeared, a slim black silhouette, pausing for that calculated instant in the doorway before stepping down — and as she walked towards us, the spotlight came on. She smiled brilliantly, spread her arms in an extravagant gesture of welcome embracing her guests, her party, the whole world ....

"Darlings!" she cried.

She was naked from the waist up, but fortunately it was a cold night and an attendant was already stepping forward with a fur wrap.

I managed to slide through the

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crowd to Holly's side.

"Hello," I said.

She was watching Carioca Jones with an uncomplicated smile which said she was glad the aging ex-3V star was enjoying herself. Now she looked up at me. She recognized me straight away.

"It's nice to see you again, Joe," she said. "I'm sorry I ran away the other night. I guess I wasn't quite thinking straight."

Caught in the trap of her blue eyes, I babbled, "That's all right, hell, I didn't know the score — I mean, I only just found out .... I'm very sorry. I ...." I realized I was going to say I'd been at Sentry Down and seen it all and how terrible it was and how sympathetic I felt — and I managed to stop myself.

"OK, Joe," she said quietly, understanding everything in two words. "This is a nice party, huh? I always enjoy Halloween. It's different. Carioca Jones is a friend of yours, is she? She's very attractive."

"She's a business acquaintance." Occasionally when I introduce her to people, I have a childish temptation to say: "And this is Carioca Jones, my blackmailer." As I might introduce my dentist, or my lawyer. From her eyrie in The Stars she sees many things — and she has a hold over me in the form of a roll of film. She has never demanded money; she doesn't need it. She just sits on the film gloatingly, like a miser. Possession of that film means she possesses me, and Carioca is a people collector.

"Joe *darling*!" Carioca stood before us, black hair falling to her waist, shrewd eyes appraising Holly. "I thought you hadn't come, which would have been *devastating*." She addressed her next remark to Holly. "Joe is a *very* close friend of mine. Joe, aren't you going to introduce me to this charming young companion of yours?"

I muttered some introductions.

"And now I must spirit Joe away from you, Holly darling, because we have some *intimate* matters to discuss. Come, Joe." She drew me into the shadows, then said, "Well, just who the hell is she, Joe? I most *certainly* didn't invite her." Already a throng of people had moved in around Holly, bringing her drinks, chatting to her. Charles handed her a Sword of Lightning and she waved it in a brilliant circle.

"Doug and Charles brought her. She's a recent widow. Go easy on her, Carioca, huh?"

"A *widow*? How *quaint*! I wasn't aware that marriage still existed — except among obscure religious sects. Well ...." Her black eyes dwelt on Holly's circle of admirers. "Everybody seems to be most kind to her, I must say. You

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brought the Sparklebugs, I trust?"

I produced the parcel from under my raincoat. Something occurred to me, some nebulous connection of images, something vague and unsettling. "Maybe we shouldn't use them," I said on impulse.

"Don't be absurd, Joe. They were most expensive and they won't keep." There was hostility in her tone; her face was settling into lines of discontent which betrayed her true age as she gazed around at the party. "What a *drag* this affiar is. And why on earth isn't the band playing? Go and tell them to start earning their pay. And get rid of that *dreadful* raincoat, Joe — it makes you look like some sordid *pervert*."

"I'm supposed to look like a pervert. This is my costume."

"Well, I'm sure it's *most* appropriate," she said acidly and moved away. "*Darlings*!" she trilled, bearing down on a group of innocent bystanders.

Meanwhile, Doug and Charles were banking up the fire and unleashing a fusillade of rockets into the night sky. The spectators, with the warmth of Carioca's liquor in their bellies, cheered each starburst. The band began to play. I caught sight of Holly talking animatedly to some woman in a tutu; the woman watched her in a sort of dazed fascination. I found a waitress and took another drink.

A Beefeater lurched near, holding a firework. "Nest of Serpents," he read the label to me. "Marshall lit four of them a moment ago, and I can't remember what the hell they *did*."

I handed over my parcel to a guy who seemed to be emceeing things. I drank some more; everybody did. Later the wind switched and the bonfire billowed smoke; I moved around, saw Holly in the center of a crowd, and plunged in. "Let's dance," I said.

We shuffled around the lawn and I held her very close; at first she talked, then became silent, resting her head against my shoulder. She seemed very light, tiny in my great clumsy arms. I said, "Listen, I'm going to make a confession."

"I like to hear confessions. Go ahead, Joe."

"I love you like crazy."

"Oh, sure. You're bombed out of your mind, too. Try saying it in the morning, when your head's aching and you want to throw up." She laughed and hugged me just a little, and I wondered if I should have said it or not. Then I decided it didn't really matter, because she didn't believe me.

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

The band had stopped, and the emcee was standing before a table on which small canisters were set

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out. The drum rolled, the cymbals clashed.

"Presenting — all the way from Aldebaran — the Sparklebugs!"

Now there was a general rearrangement as we were ushered into a wide crescent, dragging chairs and spilling drinks. Doug and Charles found Holly a seat in the center of the crescent; they stood on each side of her like bodyguards. I was out at the far end; from this position I could watch both Holly and the firework display. Nearby stood Ramsbottom in his Beefeater garb, rocking slightly as though on deck. I drew my raincoat around me. A cool wind had arisen, chilling my bare legs.

"First, a simple display," said the emcee. "This is called the Ascent of Love." He picked up one of the small canisters, about the size and shape of a shotgun cartridge. "What you are about to see has never before been witnessed on Earth — the contents of this table represent the first Sparklebugs ever imported to our planet. We are deeply indebted to Miss Carioca Jones for this display."

"Get on with it!" somebody shouted. The spotlight had already shifted to Carioca, who took the comment in her stride, smiling as people applauded.

"And now — the Ascent of Love!"

A drum roll, and the emcee whipped the seal from the cartridge. There was a hiss of indrawn air, a moment's expectant silence. Then we heard a noise which is difficult to describe: a tiny twittering singing noise, fast and melodic — the sound you'd expect if hummingbirds could sing. Above the emcee's hand two points of light appeared, one red, one blue, hard and bright.

They circled each other like tiny stars against the blackness. Then, sliding to the right, they rose diagonally and hovered above the darkened bandstand, still singing. The strangest thing was, they each left a trail through the air, one red, one blue. I closed my eyes, thinking it was the effect of the bright light on my retinas — but the trails disappeared. When I looked again they were still there, like tiny colored threads against the sky.

Then quite suddenly they began to ascend in a spiral, while their sound became a flutelike trill. The spectators said aah. The sight was incredibly beautiful, and the Sparklebugs' song seemed to reach straight to the heart. I glanced at Holly. She was sitting forward in her chair, lips parted, eyes wide.

I became aware of the droning voice of Ramsbottom. "... a planet named Socrates. They're insects, like glowworms. Yeah. See that? Mating, that's what they're doing.

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Ha, ha. Just once ev'y Socra ... Socratean year, they ...."

Now the sound reached a tiny crescendo. The Sparklebugs were far above us, trailing a red-blue spiral into the night sky. The lights winked out. The spiral faded.

The audience applauded. Holly caught my eye, smiling happily. I grinned back. The emcee picked up a canister and people immediately became quiet — all except Ramsbottom, of course. His slurred voice could be heard endlessly explaining to the woman on his left.

"Soc'tes is a frozen planet, all frozen, all dead. But ever' year it passes through this cloud of gas, see an' it heats up just a little, and for a time you get sorta an atmosphere — y'see what I mean, Laura? Just enough t' trigger the bugs."

"And next for your entertainment — the Cascade of Stars!"

We heard the hiss of the broken vacuum but saw nothing. "Ladies and gentlemen, direct your gaze skywards, if you will!"

Now we saw them winking on like fairy lights, hundreds of them of all colors falling towards us like rain, making music like a thousand tiny harps. They floated through the cold November air leaving no trail, just slipping through the sky like a condensed rainbow, extinguishing as they neared the ground. The crowd was silent, allowing the play of light and sound to seep through to their emotions. I could still hear Ramsbottom expounding however, and so I edged past him, making my way towards the middle of the audience where Holly was.

"The Sparklebugs have just one day of love every year," the emcee said. "Just a short time to attract their mate in the cold darkness of their planet — so they use every means possible, visually and aurally. And each species has a distinct pattern, instantly recognizable."

He released three bugs. The red one flew in flat circles, the golden one looped, the blue one performed erratic zigzagging.

I reached Holly's side. She smiled at me. "Aren't they neat, Joe? I'm so glad these guys brought me. I never expected anything like this."

The show went on. We saw Sparklebugs spurting from their cartridges in huge glittering fountains; we saw them flying in precision formation like a military aerobatic team; we saw clusters of them streak into the sky and scatter like a bombshell. Carioca sent The Stars aloft, and we saw flightless Sparklebugs crawling up the cable in an endless, glittering spiral. Then back to a winged variety with a shrill whistle which flew straight up, leaving ruler-straight orange trails. They flew through the anti-gravity field which extends a short distance out around The Stars, and

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the whistle sank to a breathless whisper, and the orange deepened to red as they were hurled into space ....

Later the demonstration became less formal, and the band began to play again, and people began to dance in a mist of tiny stars which seemed to jig to the beat of the music. The audience broke up into groups. Inevitably the largest, most vociferous group formed around Holly, Doug and Charles.

The bonfire was stoked up, and waitresses brought canapes, and from somewhere a large box of frankfurters appeared. To this day I suspect Charles of smuggling this plebeian fare into Carioca's high-class party, but he still denies it. We broke sticks from Carioca's priceless alien shrubs, impaled the franks, and soon the air was redolent with the aroma of roasting meat.

"Well, *really*, Joe."

Carioca was at my side. Above her head spun a silver halo of Sparklebugs attracted by an upright wand projecting from her coiffure. She'd been circulating among the groups of revelers, laughing with mouth wide and head thrown back, embracing people with exaggerated cries of delight, whispering into the ears of men with extravagant intimacy. Now she was prepared to capture the attention of the biggest group.

But it didn't work out that way.

Holly was dancing with Charles. They danced without touching, swaying in time to the music. A few minutes ago a number of us had been dancing, but somehow we'd all stopped, one by one, and drifted into a large circle to watch Holly and Charles — or more particularly Holly.

I've seen dancers in my time. I've seen alien troupes, all staccato rhythms and impossible movement. I've seen ballet over an antigravity field in Frisco Bowl. I've seen the underwater Dolphin Dance. And I've seen the early Carioca Jones movies, when the young Carioca made walking look like a fertility rite.

But I've never seen anything like Holly Davenport.

The funny thing is, she was hardly moving. She stood there with her arms quite close to her sides, hands held slightly forward in a position which suggested a snapping of fingers to the slow beat; but the fingers were still. Her hips moved; for the first time I noticed she was wearing a long orange skirt and a pale blouse. I'd been so engrossed in her personality that I hadn't seen her clothes ....

As she turned I saw her face. There was a half smile and her eyes were almost closed. Her whole body

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was in slow, expressive movement — and just what she expressed none of us could have put into words. It was introspective, almost private — yet it spoke to us all. Melancholy yet vital, she seemed to be telling us that life goes on and life is good; she made me want to cry, she made me want to love her, she made me want to give her children. I don't know what she was doing for the women present, but they watched just as raptly.

Pale dawn was exposing the silhouettes of the coastal mountains as a strange thing happened. The latest cluster of Sparklebugs arrayed themselves around her, swaying and changing color as though her dancing said something to the alien insects too, as though it was something universal and elemental.

"Well, Joe Sugar, are you going to ask me to dance or not?"

I ignored Carioca. It might be her party, but Holly Davenport was the star.

The music died away, and Holly stopped moving, and her eyes opened. You could almost feel the remembered past falling away from her as she returned to the present. "Thanks, Charles," she said automatically — then she realized she was the center of attention again. "Oh, boy," she said uncertainly. "What did I do?"

The dancing Sparklebugs were beginning to fade from around her now, winking out one by one, disappearing. Charles still stood there, staring at her. A bright star twinkled before her face, golden, orange, turquoise. It was gone. She smiled. "What happens to them?"

It was as though she was in the center of a stage. Everybody watched her, everybody listened to her, a small pretty almost-blonde woman who represented the joy and beauty and sadness of humanity. Everybody listened, so somebody had to answer. Ramsbottom answered.

"They die, of course. What the hell else?"

"They die?"

"Well, sure." Suddenly Ramsbottom's slurred voice became almost whining as Holly faced him. "They can't live, can they. Their planet only has an atmosphere for one ... one two-thousandth of the time."

It was the planet Socrates' fault, not humanity's.

"What the hell do you know about it?" said somebody loudly. But everyone else waited for Holly's reply. They surrounded her in a great circle, yet it seemed that she was the accuser, they the defendants. They waited.

Holly said, "Oh."

Carioca said, "Well, now, it's getting light. Let's all have some coffee before we go home, shall we?"

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Holly said, "You mean we've been watching them die, all this time? For fun?"

The sky was cloudless and cold, pale blue. Day was creeping up all around us. People shuffled uneasily. Women looked for their purses. I suddenly found I was bitterly cold. The fire had burned down; the glow of alcohol had left me with a blinding headache; my ridiculous bare legs felt damp with dew, or maybe frost.

Carioca whispered to me loudly, "Get that *wretched* little girl out of here right now, Joe. She's turning my party into a *disaster*."

Now we could see one another clearly and we looked terrible, the men unshaven and the women streaky. The costumes looked immature and faded; why the hell were we wearing them? Cold dawn came, freezing the fun.

And we could see something else.

The lawn was littered with thousands of tiny corpses, spent Sparklebugs in a patina of death on the velvet-smooth grass. A few still twitched. Holly knelt and picked one up; it couldn't have been more than a centimeter long. But there were so many of them. I kept saying to myself: they're only insects, for God's sake! Lying there like the aftermath of some huge disaster. Holly knelt.

I saw her kneeling but I couldn't go to her. The thing was too big for me.

She stood. She smiled. She walked up to Carioca Jones. She said, "Thanks very much for a nice party, Carioca. It's really been lots of fun. When I get settled in, I hope you come over to my place."

Carioca smiled like a death's head. "It's been wonderful having you, Holly *darling*." She watched Holly, escorted by Doug and Charles, walk away. Holly walked very lightly, as though scared to put her feet down. "Now!" cried Carioca brightly, turning. "Let's all have that coffee and maybe just a little eye-opener to go with it!"

But her guests were gathering up their things, and hoping they'd see one another real soon, and going home.

And miracles don't happen nowadays, do they?

Awakening in the afternoon is a sad thing, like forgetting your childhood. The day is more than half gone, and it doesn't seem worthwhile doing anything very much before nightfall, and all the time there is the feeling of something missing, something lost. I crawled out of bed and showered, and the fierce little droplets seemed to bore into my aching skull. I dressed and looked out of the window at what was left of the day. It was damp and misty and Novem-

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bery, one of those days when you regret having a waterfront lot. There's just too much wetness around.

I couldn't get Holly out of my mind.

I brewed some coffee, sat at the table clutching my mug and thinking. All the time I saw her kneeling there; I saw her hit but coming back, knocked down again but recovering, hit again and very shaky now, with the cumulative effect of all those blows. In time most people recover from the loss of a loved one, but Holly was fragile, and I suspected her love went deeper than most.

She was fragile and small, and maybe a small miracle would have helped.

There was no way I could bring myself to call her; I was too scared, too sure that she would smile from the visiphone as though nothing had ever happened. The screen watched me blankly, daring me to push the buttons.

In the end — unbelievably — I found myself driving to Carioca's place. I can't explain the motivation; maybe it was an urge to revisit the scene of the latest crime; maybe I wanted to hear someone say Holly's name. And I could be sure Carioca would say her name. Maybe I wanted to mortify the mind.

The Stars was not in the sky as I drove across the Peninsula; usually it is visible for kilometers around. I turned into Carioca's driveway and found three other vehicles there. In addition to Carioca's turtle-like monster, the small hovercar of Doug Marshall lay on the blacktop beside a large truck. I pulled up and got out, wondering what I was stepping into. Possibly there was a dispute in progress. I hesitated, then heard the hum of machinery from beyond the bushes.

Walking on, I was confronted by a sudden vision of fear, a nightmarish remembrance.

A crimson Barrelorgan stood on the lawn ....

Charles saw me and called out, "Move yourself, Joe! The bugs'll rot if they're exposed to the atmosphere for another day." He tipped a panful of little things into the drum. "I borrowed the equipment from the Organ Pool," he said.

A number of people crawled around the lawn and among the shrubs with pans and brushes, like overzealous housewives ....

He handed me a brush and pan and I began to cover a patch of ground near Doug and Holly. We exchanged brief greetings. My pants knees were soon soaked. Rain drizzled down. Holly was singing under her breath. Somewhere inside me a happiness grew.

Doug said, "The bugs are hermaphroditic and they mate simultaneously, so Ramsbottom said.

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Then they degenerated into egg cases within minutes. That's what all these things are — abdominal shells each holding around a hundred eggs."

I glanced at Holly and the happiness became an inward glow, like good Scotch. Her hair was wet and straggly and raindrops dripped from the tip of her nose and chin. Egg cases rattled into her pan. Life goes on. I wanted to kiss her, and I knew that one day I would and hoped that it would mean something and not be just one of those casual things.

"Joe *darling*!" Carioca's voice interrupted my thoughts. She emerged from The Stars trailing a long cable. "It's delightful to see you again. I *do* hope you enjoyed the party." I watched, incredulous, as she carried a suction cleaner from The Stars and plugged the cable into it. She saw me staring. "After all," she said defensively, "Sparklebugs are terribly expensive. There must be literally *thousands* of dollars lying about these grounds ...."

Other people arrived, people I remembered in outlandish costumes at the party, but now in working clothes. And for the rest of that afternoon, until gloomy daylight deepened into wet evening, they worked. Then they said goodby to Holly, and left.

This party had been for Holly, too.

The tiny aliens were in safe hibernation. The Barrelorgan was dogged down — the unlikely machinery of a miracle. A simple miracle, consisting of one man's brainwave, a few visiphone calls, a number of willing helpers. Afterwards, I found it was Charles Wentworth's brainwave.

Everyone had gone home except Doug, Charles, Holly and I. We stood in the rain, grinning at each other. Something needed to be said, but nobody knew quite what it was. Finally Carioca Jones said something.

Carioca said, "Ah, what the hell. Let's all go inside and have a drink, shall we?"

TO OUR READERS

Our last price increase was three years ago and increased costs again compel us to raise the price of F&SF. New single copy price will be $1.25; new annual subscription rate $12.50. The increase will be effective with the March issue, as of Dec. 30, 1977. **You can still enter a new subscription (or extend your current one) at the old rates.** Use the form on page 161.

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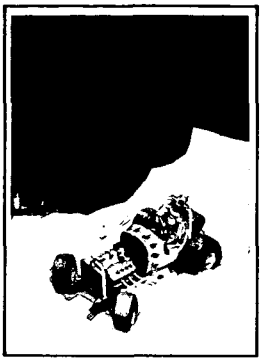

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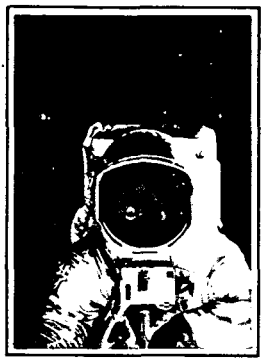

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This very short and very inventive story is James Quinn's first fiction sale. Mr. Quinn is 22, a recent graduate of Kent State University and now working as editor of The Holmes County Farmer-Hub, "a weekly paper located midway between Akron and Columbus."

Smoke Gets In Your Eyes

by JAMES QUINN

"I can tell, you're going through the same thing I did," Louie had said to me. "You're a ringin' man and there's gonna be no rest for you until you get your chance at the King.

"One of these days you're gonna wake up and know you're ready. When that happens, go to Akron to a club called The Box Car. There's a man there called the Colonel 'cause of his Southern accent and dignified ways. Go to him and say Louie sent you. Say it's time for your crack at the King."

Months went by and then years. I practiced until I was number one in Jacksonville; everybody knew my name. Guys from all over came to challenge me and left with empty wallets. People all over Florida said I was the best ringer they had ever seen, even better than Louis, and he used to be King back in '47.

Then it happened, just like Louie said it would. I woke up with a clear feeling that said pack your bags and head for Akron.

I'd had $16,000 when I left, but plane fare, the hotel bill and two ham-fisted punks took care of damn near all of it. I walked into The Box Car with $27 in my pocket.

While I stood at the bar sweating and feeling like a hick, a man in a white suit, black string necktie and silver sideburns strutted up beside me with a prideful dignity like a Tennessee Walker.

"Give me the usual, Bob," he said to the bartender in a gravelly Southern accent.

"Do people call you the Colonel?" I asked.

He stiffened and turned toward me like I'd called him a nigger. "Sometimes they do, sir. But not to my face," he said curtly. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"My name's Stengal, Billy Stengal. Louie Tucker told me to see

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you when I wanted to take a crack at the King."

His aspect changed when I said Louie's name. He smiled and sipped on his drink while he looked me over. "So Louie sent you, did he? That man used to be one hell of a ringer when he was King. You never saw such style, until a kid from Iowa came boppin' in off the street and knocked Louie off his throne. How's Louie getting on these days?"

"Not bad when the d.t.'s don't bother him," I said.

The Colonel shook his head. "That's a powerful fall from the old days. Louie used to walk in here with a girl on each arm and a diamond ring on each pinky. Dudes would line up to bet with him and he'd take their money. Maybe five, six thousand a night. And that was when a dollar was a dollar. Well, here's to old Louie," he said and downed his drink. "You want to be King, do you? Look over there, coming through the door. That's Jack Lennox, the man you have to beat."

I looked across the smoke-filled room and saw a fat man with short black hair and a tux walking into the room. People called to him as he came in, and he waved to them like a movie hero waving to his star-struck fans.

"Why don't you have a drink while I tell Jack that he's got a serious challenger tonight," said the Colonel. "Bob, bring a regular over here for my friend. He needs to cool off."

He started toward the gaming tables, then turned and looked at me again. "By the way, where are you from, Billy?" He smiled when I said Jacksonville, then left me.

The bartender placed a drink on the bar in front of me. It was a mint julep, naturally. The Colonel got next to Jack, who was now surrounded by his friends and lovers, a rich, carefree-looking crowd. They were too far away for me to hear their joking and talking, but from their quick smiles I knew it was the flattering small talk that surrounds a celebrity.

The Colonel whispered into Jack's ear. I figured it was about me, and, sure enough, he pointed to me with his cigar. Jack looked at me and our eyes met, but his grin never faltered. He raised his glass to me, and I raised mine to him before he turned again to the Colonel.

I finished my drink and waited for the games to begin. Soon, Jack sat down at the ringer's table and lit a cigar. I squeezed my way through the crowd that flocked to Jack. The Colonel sat down across from him and introduced a guy with an Italian name. They agreed on stakes of $500 a game.

The Italian dude went first. He

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took a big fat stogy out of his coat pocket and lit it with a silver lighter. After a long drag he cocked his head back and fired ten big smoke rings clear across the room and out the door.

The spectators clapped politely for the Italian's smoke rings, then quieted for Jack's turn. Jack took a drag on his own cigar, a Havana, and fired ten rings just like the Italian's. Mystified, the crowd watched the rings sail into the cloak room, then sail out in the opposite direction.

Applause and laughter greeted Jack's theatrics as the Colonel, who was referee, said, "This round wins Mr. Lennox $500."

On it went. Ringers from all over the world were in the room trying to win a round from King Jack. Sometimes they did, too, when Jack let them. Then they would get excited and put all their money on one bet, and Jack would clean them out. He blew helixes and cannonballs and triple inverted rings spinning around and around. He even blew a hula dancer who twitched her grass skirt three times before the smoke cleared. At the end of an hour he'd won $7000 and had no more challengers.

Except me.

The Colonel gave me a wink while Jack finished off a drunk Texan. He motioned me over and the room got quiet.

"Are you here to blow a few rings?" asked Jack.

The heat of the room suddenly became oppressive, and the smoke stung in my nose. My throat tightened and was so dry I couldn't speak, only nod yes.

"Have a seat then, son," Jack said as he pointed to the chair beside him. "What's your name?"

"Billy Stengal," I said as I felt the sweat forming on my brow. "I hear you're from Jacksonville," Jack said. I nodded again and he said, "Name your stakes."

A deadly hush went over the room as I put $20 on the table. One sound cracked the incredulous silence, a woman's laugh.

I felt like a six-year-old in the school play, standing in front of hundreds of grown-ups and not being able to remember my lines. I had a feeling my fly was open and I had to force myself not to look down and check.

"Mr. Stengal," said the Colonel. "There's a $100 minimum at this table."

"Let's waive that rule this time," said Jack with regal generosity. "Mr. Stengal has come a long way to bet with me." He turned to me and said, "You can have ten to one," and he laid down two $100 bills.

Jack blew first. He made it easy; a double clockwise spiral. I beat it with a triple ring leapfrog.

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"Mr. Stengal wins $200," said the Colonel.

Over and over, Jack blew first, giving me harder and harder smoke statues to beat. Over and over, I beat him with set-ups I've known since I was a kid. Each time I beat him, my confidence became more unshakable; I knew I would be King.

After about six bets I had a pile of money as big as Jack's. He leaned over and issued the challenge I was waiting for.

"How about best two out of three for the whole pile?"

"That sounds fine."

Jack took a deep puff that was all business. Out of his mouth came a chorus line and a three-piece band, all moving to the same rhythm.

The crowd burst into appreciative applause as the smoke cleared. Jack leaned back in his chair and smiled at me with a superior grin.

I smiled right back and took a puff on my own cigar. Out of my mouth flowed a smoky Mississippi with a riverboat, paddlewheels churning and smoke stacks puffing, chugging down the river. To top it off, a misty passenger leaned too far over the rail and fell with a splash into the smoky river.

Silence. For fifteen seconds all you could hear was the ticking of dozens of wrist watches. Then there was a better sound, applause for the man who would be King.

Jack sat stunned, the butt of his cigar hanging loosely from the side of his moth. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

It was my turn to blow. I had Jack by the short hairs, and so I decided to do a double clockwise spiral, the same set-up he blew to me on our first bet. It was insulting, but I needed to do it, to tell everyone I am King.

Jack had to blow, and so he beat it with a flock of geese flapping away. He won, of course, but everyone saw how the edges were too misty and the smoke dissipated too fast. He was finished, he knew it, and it was his turn to blow.

He took a couple of experimental puffs on his cigar, making sure the flame was just right and the smoke had the perfect hot thickness. His hand trembled just a bit when he finally put the stub in his mouth and pulled deeply.

The smoke crawled slowly out of his mouth and began to form. The edges were misty and the details in the cloud were hard to make out, but it was easy to see the general picture. It was a group of people having a party, smoking, drinking and talking. In one corner a couple was boogying to a fast beat, and you could almost hear the music.

I gripped the arms of my chair and had to stop myself from laugh-

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ing out loud. Jack's cloud was good, but not nearly good enough to stop me. It was like he'd realized he was all through and had given up.

Then, in the second before the smoke melted into a formless cloud, I noticed a figure in the middle of the party. He was defined better than the other images, and I could tell he was having a loud conversation with the woman next to him, who looked like she wished she had an excuse to get away from him. It was me, looking like a character out of a cartoon. I could see everyone at the party was talking about me behind my back, laughing at my ill-fitting clothes, my loud voice and awkward manners.

No one else had seen me in the cloud, no one but Jack and me were at the right angle. I turned to Jack but he was looking intently at his fingernails. There was no laughter in his eyes, just impatience.

Shaking, I took a puff and puckered. I tried to envision the cloud I had planned for this moment; a one-armed bandit paying off, the smoky coins falling to the floor and rolling away. But it wouldn't come to my mind, the vision of me at the party kept pushing it away. I closed my eyes and blew. When I opened them again, I saw pale smoke rings vanishing into the air.

Jack became King again in a second. Without pause, he puffed out a cloud showing a man trying to seduce a big-breasted woman under a canopy bed. At the crucial moment the smoke man mounted the smoke woman and lost his hard-on.

And the smoke man blew away.

I stood up and my chair thudded to the floor behind me. No one heard, the applause for King Jack was too loud. Red-faced, I walked to the door, and the cashier called to me as I went by.

"You Billy Stengal?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"The Colonel told me to give you this before you left. He said you'd need it." She handed me an envelope.

Inside was a one-way ticket to Jacksonville.

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CARRY ME BACK TO THE HOUSE OF PAIN

I don't often have occasion in this column to talk about actors, simply because in the majority of science fiction/fantasy/supernatural films, the acting runs a gamut of A to B, from inept to adequate.

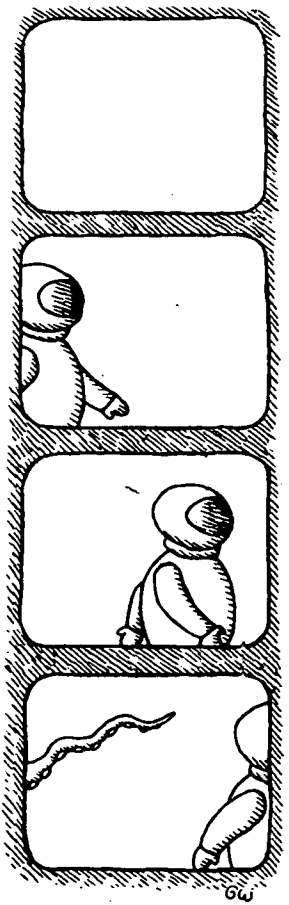
This month, however, I have a remake to review that necessarily brings back memories of the original, which happened to star one of the greatest, if not the greatest, actor ever to hit Hollywood.

The current film is *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the older (1932) version was *The Island of Lost Souls*, and the actor is Charles Laughton. I had always admired his work, but it was seeing the few scenes that were shot for the aborted epic *I, Claudius* that convinced me that he had no peer as a screen actor.* His Dr. Moreau was almost as memorable. There have been mad doctors and mad doctors, but this was *the* Mad Doctor, ranging from the hearty British host of the beginning to the amoral frenzy of the end, and never losing the essential humanity of the man.

**Fans of the historical novel will be glad to hear that* I, Claudius *has been turned into one of those estimable British Masterpiece Theatre pieces (without, of course, Mr. Laughton, alas) which will be seen on the NET network this season.*

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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The Island of Lost Souls had other advantages besides Laughton. Bela Lugosi's almost reptilian nonhumanity made the Speaker of the Law an extraordinary creation; his "back to the house of pain" line is epically chilling, no matter how often one hears it.

The older film is in black and white — I have come to the reactionary conclusion that the almost obligatory use of color in the past decade has, with some rare exceptions, done in the horror film. (Will Kubrick be aware of this, I wonder, as he films Stephen King's *The Shining?*) — and is short, only 72 minutes.

And to try to get across a fairly subtle point without too much detail, *Lost Souls* was made before the conventions of the horror film were fully set. One is plunged into the thick of the situation almost immediately instead of the endless "what's going on here" build of the later, conventional form.

Now by the very positive points of the first film that I've brought up, you can pretty well guess the negative points of the new one. Before going into them, though, I guess one should precis the plot for those few who have not read the novel (apologies, Mr. Wells, for not mentioning you before) or seen the first movie.

A young man is shipwrecked on a deserted Pacific island. There he finds a "civilized" compound run by an English scientist whose experiments are obscure but which involve various large wild animals. It turns out that the doctor is discredited by his profession for experiments on animals, raising them to human level by a mysterious serum. The beast men are his servants; there are others running wild in the jungle who have formed their own primitive society.

By the intruder's decision that the doctor is immoral, a chain of events is set in motion wherein the beast men revolt and take the doctor to his own "house of pain," i.e. his laboratory. (That's an amalgamation of the film scripts — the first, incidentally, being by Philip Wylie. I haven't read the novel in 30 years.)

As for the new version — oh, to hell with it, there's no real point in going into great detail. It's too long. Half the film is devoted to what's-going-on-here. Burt Lancaster is no Charles Laughton. Richard Basehart, as the Speaker of the Law, looks like a rather hairy but elegantly groomed Old Testament prophet. And the socko ending that they were obviously leading up to — that the girl (what girl? ... don't worry about it) is really one of Moreau's creations — is inexplicably and totally cut out. (Because it might get an X rating for bestiality, I wonder?)

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Look for the old version on TV.

Late, late show department ... I have always avoided an old B film called *She Devil* because it really looked like the pits of the '50s low budgeter. But I was travelling around the dial the other night and stumbled on it and watched for a minute. It looked just as I had thought it would, but the name of the title character — Kyra — caught my attention and then sent me racing to my reference books.

Willis's *Horror and Science Fiction Films* threw me a little bit. The source of the film was a short story by one John Jessel, which was *not* what I was after. However, the title of the story was "The Adaptive Ultimate" which *was* what I had in mind.

Walt Lee's ever amazing *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films*, however, cleared it up; John Jessel was indeed a pseudonym of Stanley G. Weinbaum, the short lived writer of the '30s whose work brought a new sophistication to science fiction.

I'm always excited to find a film whose genesis is from a *real* in-genre s/f work. The story concerns a serum (yes, *another* serum) which so transfers the chemistry of a mousy young woman that she is able to change herself physically and emotionally to adapt to any situation, whether it be to withstand poison or better herself in the social stratum by becoming a ravishing blonde.

It's a gimmick story, as almost all genre short stories were then, but Weinbaum brought to it some interesting characterization and situations. The movie, despite its overall tackiness, does stick pretty closely to the original, though with no style whatsoever. And Mari Blanchard brings to the title role all the dynamic dramatic range of a '50s Farrah Fawcett-Majors.

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In which Willy Newbury's Harrison Trust Company receives a loan application from a company called United Imp — that's imp as in gnomes and elves — and Willy is sent to investigate . . .

United Imp

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

There is nothing like a brush with the unknown to knock the self-conceit out of one.

I had just been promoted to vice-president of the Harrison Trust Company and was feeling pretty pleased with myself. Looking back, I suspect that my promotion owed less to my financial expertise than to the fact that, in my late thirties, my hair had turned prematurely gray. This gave me the sober, reliable look that people approve in their bankers. So, when the then vice-president retired, Esau Drexel moved me into that slot.

At first, Denise fussed about my hair, saying she did not want to seem married to an old man just yet. I tried some dye but found it more trouble than it was worth; you have to repeat the treatment every week or two. So I put on my stubborn face and refused to dye any more. Denise complained of my hair for years; but when I got promoted, the salary reconciled her. She takes the realistic French view of money.

I had not been long at this job when Drexel called me into the president's office.

"Willy," he said, "here's a puzzle. Fellow in Atlanta wants to borrow five hundred grand. Claims he has enough commercial orders to support the loan; but I can't find him in Dun and Bradstreet, or anywhere. Besides, what does he want to come to us for? There are plenty of banks in Georgia."

"Maybe they've all turned him down," I said. "What's his line?"

Drexel tossed a letter across his desk. The letterhead said UNITED IMP, with a post office box number in Atlanta. A sheaf of photostats of orders for the company's products was stapled to the letter.

The letter explained that the company manufactured wrought-iron grillwork. They had been

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swamped with orders; hence they needed the loan to expand. The letter went on:

You are doubtless aware of the current vogue for nostalgic restoration. All over the South, decrepit mansions are being refurbished as tourist attractions. In many of these houses, the original grillwork has rusted away and must be replaced. Since we command the services of a labor force, on one hand highly skilled and on the other not unionized, we hope to capture a substantial part of the market for our products.

"Of course," said Drexel, "we don't want to get involved in a fight with the goddamn unions. If that man in the White House — but never mind; what's done is done. What do you think, Willy?"

I frowned at the letter. "I see some funny things here. What does 'United Imp' mean? What's the 'Imp'?"

"Imperial? Imports? Or maybe impostors?"

"Perhaps it doesn't stand for anything. There's no period after the *p*."

"You mean 'imp' as in gnomes or elves?"

"Or kobolds or knockers. Then, look how the man signs his name: 'Colin Owens, Magiarch.'"

"Some kind of cult leader, I suppose." Drexel buzzed his secretary. "Miss Carnero, please get your dictionary."

The dictionary did not list "magiarch," but the meaning was plain. Drexel said:

"If he's one of these fakers, telling his suckers they're reincarnations of George Washington or promising to make supermen of them in one easy lesson, no wonder the Georgia banks turned him down. I think we'd better give him the brush-off."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "A man can be a nut in one way and a shrewd businessman in another. We ought at least to look into his proposition. Besides, business has been slow around here, and we've got too much cash lying idle. We could charge him the prime plus one-half."

"Prime plus two, more like. But at such a high-risk rate, we'd have to send someone to Atlanta to watch him."

"Well, let's say prime plus one or one and a half."

"It won't be any rate at all unless we know more about the fellow. Tell you what, Willy: You fly down to Atlanta and look over his plant. How soon can you go?"

"Early next week, I guess."

"Fine. I'll write this Colin Owens, telling him you're coming. Think you can handle the job?"

"Oh, sure. Don't worry about

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me, boss." Famous last words.

At the Hartsfield Airport, two men met me. Colin Owens turned out to be small, slight, and elderly, with silver hair and an English accent. His blue eyes beamed benignly through steel-rimmed spectacles as he introduced his assistant, Forrest Bellamy. This was a tall, lean, dark man in his thirties, with a Southern mountain twang. While Bellamy was polite enough, there was something uncomfortably tense about him.

"I am delighted you've come, Mr. Newbury," said Owens. "Have you been in Atlanta before?"

"No, this is my first visit."

"Then we shall be pleased to show you the sights of the new queen of the South."

"Where are you putting me?"

"We have reserved a good motel room in Decatur. That's on the side of town near our plant."

"Fine. When can I see your plant?"

"There's no hurry about that. First, we shall give you a general orientation tour. Take Mr. Newbury's bag, Forrest."

I was not so naive as to expect an Atlanta of Southern belles in crinolines and parasols. I was, however, surprised by its bustling, up-to-date air, with skyscrapers and freeways sprouting here and there. As I was being whirled through the Memorial Arts Center, the Cyclorama, and other sights, I kept trying to pin down my hosts on their operations.

"Why," I asked, "did you come to us, instead of to a local bank?" Owens and I were sitting in back while Bellamy drove.

"I thought you might ask that," said Owens. After a pause, he answered: "I might as well confess that we tried the local sources but were refused — not, however, for reasons germane to our finances."

"How do you mean?"

"Well — ah —"

"What he means," said Bellamy, "is, we reckon like there's a certain prejudice against us, irregardless of how sound the business is."

"How so?"

"Well, for one thing, Mr. Owens ain't a Georgian. He's not even a native-born American, but a naturalized Englishman."

"Excuse me, Forrest," said Owens. "I am a Briton but not an Englishman. I am Welsh." He turned to me. "I never can get Americans to make the distinction. Go on, Forrest."

"For another, United Imp is, in a kind of a way, a sideline with us. Some folks are ignorant about our main business, so they get funny ideas."

"And what's your main business, if I may ask?"

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Owens's faded blue eyes took on a faraway look. "Merely endeavoring to dissuade our fellow men from inflicting needless wounds and sore defeat upon one another, by the application of the ancient wisdom."

"You mean you head a religious sect or cult?"

"What's in a name? The Anthropophili are a benevolent society, devoted to the pursuit of truth, peace, and beauty...."

Owens gripped my forearm, while his guileless blue eyes stared into mine as he launched into a sermon — lofty, earnest, and cloudy. It did not greatly differ from what you can hear every week in a church or a temple — or for that matter at a Vedanta meeting. He spangled his talk with tags from Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Milton.

My reaction to Owens's preaching was mixed. On one hand, I rather liked this learned old occultist. On the other, I shuddered at the thought of entrusting our depositors' money to him. Still, I tried to view his project objectively.

When we were fifteen miles or so east of Atlanta, Bellamy turned his head to say: "Here's Stone Mountain." On the plain ahead, a huge granite dome loomed up for nearly a thousand feet, like the half-buried skull of some mythical monster. "We got time to take him up before dinner, Master?"

Owens looked at his watch. "I fear not, Forrest. 'The dragon wing of night o'erspreads the earth.' Continue on to the Oecus; Maggie can be quite difficult if we are late for meals."

Bellamy made a couple of turns and drew up in a small graveled parking lot, near a large house shaded by longleaf pines.

The Oecus was a rambling structure, which seemed to have been built by a committee, each member of which had designed one part to suit himself, without reference to his colleagues' plans. No two rooms appeared to be set on the same level. There were spiral stairs in odd places, decorative mosaics of colored glass set in cement, and a couple of amateurish mural paintings of winged beings flapping around a cloudy sky. Sounds of hammering came from one end of the building, and I glimpsed a small group of young men and women in work clothes, nailing and plastering.

"What's the origin of this house?" I asked.

Owens explained: "It was built before the First World War by an eccentric architect. The property was subsequently abandoned and had fallen into disrepair before the Anthropophili obtained the title and restored the building. The repairs are not quite complete. Would you like a drink?"

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"Why, yes, indeed," I said.

Owens disappeared and returned with three small glasses and a bottle of sherry. "Ordinarily we do not indulge in alcoholic beverages in the Anthropophili, but we make exceptions for eminent visitors. 'Moderation is the noblest gift of heaven.'"

He poured me, Bellamy, and himself each a thimbleful. It was good stuff as far as it went. While we sipped, Owens talked a monologue about the ideals of his organization. I was ready for a second when the dinner gong sounded and Owens put his bottle away.

There were about thirty members of the cult at the long table. The members, including those who had been working on the house, were mostly young and casually dressed. Several were black. Since this was in the early days of the civil-rights agitation in the South, I wondered if the racial integration of Owens's cult had barred him from local financing. That subject, however, never came up.

The food was plain but excellent. The conversation was mostly over my head, dealing with local politics and personalities. When dinner was over, Owens said:

"Mr. Newbury, I should like to show you our products."

He led me to one end of the house, down steps, and into a storage room. There were heaps of wrought-iron grilles, railings, gates, wall brackets, planters, outdoor furniture, and other examples of the modern blacksmith's art. While I am no judge of such matters, these artifacts seemed well-made.

"It's a matter of price," said Owens. "With the unusual personnel of my crew, I can undersell any other maker of such products. If I can expand, there won't be the slightest difficulty about repaying the loan, with a handsome profit to our organization. This profit will be used to further the aims of our movement."

"Do you use the members of your society as workers?"

"Oh, dear, no! They are seekers of truth, fully occupied with our crusade to bring peace and prosperity to the world. My workers are persons of quite a different sort."

He steered me gently to the door. Then he and Bellamy whisked me off to my motel.

"We'll see you first thing in the morning," said Bellamy. "What time do y'all like to get up?"

In the morning, they drove me to Stone Mountain. We parked and took one of the new cable cars to the top. The car soared up over the colossal statues of Davis, Lee, and Jackson on horseback, which were carved in the west face. I understand that the sculptors meant, when the project began, to add a

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mile-long parade of Confederate soldiers as well. They ran out of money, however, before the project got that far.

Holding a stanchion in the crowded cable car, Bellamy said, "Every year, some young numskull tries to show off to his girl by climbing all the way down one of the steep sides. Then he gets to where it's too steep to hold on, and that's the end of him."

On top, we strolled about admiring the view. Bellamy told me of their further plans for my entertainment — the riverboat ride, the restored ante-bellum plantation — until I said:

"I certainly appreciate your hospitality, gentlemen. But, before we do business, I simply must see your plant and these extraordinary workers."

Owens said, "Well — ah — you saw the quality of our ironwork last night. I can show you lists of the prevailing prices for such products and what we sell ours for. I can explain our system of advertising and distribution —"

"Please. I am merely a trustee for our depositors' money; I have to know what I'm putting it into. So I must see your facilities with my own eyes."

Owens coughed. "There are — ah — some practical difficulties to that. You see, sir, there is some question of the title to the site of our factory. If the precise location should become generally known, it might cause us great inconvenience. We might have to relocate. Furthermore, our personnel are averse to letting outsiders see them at their tasks."

I shook my head. "Sorry, fellows. No factory tour, no money."

Owens and Bellamy exchanged looks. Bellamy scowled, glared, and took a step towards me, as if his temper were about to explode in violence. A slight movement from Owens caused Bellamy to step back and make his face blank. Owens said: "Put your ear down against the granite, Mr. Newbury, and tell me what you hear."

The prospect did not look promising for my pants; but, I thought, I could bill the bank for a new pair. I got down and put my ear to the elephant-gray rock. A couple of other tourists, fifty feet away, stared at me.

"I hear a faint rumble," I said. "A vibration almost below the lower limit of audibility. I suppose it's the machinery that runs the cable cars."

Owens shook his head. "We are too far from that machinery, as you can ascertain by repeating the test in other parts of the rock."

"What then?" I said, getting up and dusting off my clothes.

"Are you familiar with the lines from Spenser:

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'... such ghastly noise of iron chains
And brazen cauldrons thou shalt rumbling hear,
Which thousand sprites with long enduring pains
Do toss, that it will stun thy feeble brains ...'?"

"'Fraid not," I said. "*The Faerie Queene* is one of those things I'm always promising myself to read but never getting around to. What's the point?"

"The story, as Spenser tells it, is that Merlin once summoned up a host of spirits and compelled them to set about prefabricating a brazen wall for his native city of Carmarthen. Then he went off and got himself entombed by Vivien, or whatever her name was. But nobody told the poor devils to stop, so they are still at work. Or at least, they were before I got in touch with them."

"Yes?" I said. "You mean you've got Spenser's spirits hammering out wrought-iron grilles in a cave beneath Stone Mountain?"

"Quite. Some might question the propriety of the term 'spirits' for my workers, who are very solid, substantial creatures."

"You mean gnomes or dwarves?"

"They are called by various names. I shan't try to explain how I secured their service, because that would take us into the complexities of magical theory."

"But how did you get them to this country? Did you smuggle them aboard a ship, or did they tunnel under the Atlantic?"

Owens smiled. "Such beings have their own resources, their own — ah — mysterious ways."

"If the demons of Carmarthen were brass workers, did they have to learn how to handle iron?"

"Be assured, they can handle any metal. Now, since you insist, we shall descend the mountain and visit our manufactory — at least, to the extent that it is safe to show it to you."

We drove back to the Oecus. Owens and Bellamy took me around the house to the rear. Here I found a curious structure: a large sunken area bounded by stone walls, which rose to waist height above the outer ground surface but extended down fifteen or twenty feet below ground level on the inner side. It was as if someone had begun to build a big house but had gotten no further than the cellar. A couple of honeylocust trees shaded the area with their feathery leaves.

A ramp between two curving stone walls provided access to the lower level. There were also a couple of other down-sloping passageways, but these came to blind ends. The thing conveyed the im-

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pression of being the product of a very strange mind.

In the middle of the lower level was another, narrower depression, perhaps six feet deep, ten wide, and thirty long, and brick-paved. Owens and Bellamy led me down steps to this sub-basement. At one end, I saw a heavy iron door, which Owens unlocked and opened with a screech of hinges.

"Watch your head," he said.

I ducked under the lintel and followed the little magus, while Bellamy brought up the rear. The down-sloping tunnel was lined with planks and dimly lit by an occasional electric light bulb. We hiked for some minutes in silence. The planks gave way to solid granite, and the passageway became level. Owens paused to indicate a series of side chambers.

"Storage for our products," he said.

A glimpse showed piles of wrought-iron artifacts, like those I had seen in the Oecus. We plodded on.

Early in the descent, I had become aware of a sound like the rumble I had heard atop Stone Mountain. As we went onward, the sound waxed louder.

We came to a dimly-lit vestibule, containing stacks of wrought-iron objects and several chairs. The noise was now so loud that we had to raise our voices. I could feel the vibration through the soles of my shoes.

There was a great metallic banging and clanging, mixed with guttural shouts. The speech was too much mingled with the clangor to make anything of. I could not even guess the language.

"This is as far as we shall go," said Owens. "As I have explained, our workers are extremely shy. They allow nobody but Forrest and me into their workshop. In any event, you can now report that we do have a productive work force, can't you?"

"I guess so," I said. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get the hell out of here." I was finding the noise and the confinement oppressive.

"Surely," said Owens.

We hiked back up the long slope in silence. When to my relief we reached the surface, it was lunch time. I ate one of the Oecus's simple but sumptuous meals and spent the afternoon with Owens, going over his books and learning the economics of the wrought-iron business.

They invited me to dinner, but I begged off. I had to get back to the motel to organize my thoughts, write up my notes and telephone Drexel.

When I called Esau Drexel that evening, I told my story, saying: "I still don't know what he's got in that cave, but it must be something.

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I can't imagine that all that wrought-iron stuff and correspondence that he showed me is some elaborate charade. His business seems to be thriving."

"Then why is he so hell-bent to expand? Why can't he be satisfied with his current profits?"

"He's an idealist who wants to save the world from blowing itself up. Maybe he's got something there. He figures to earn enough from his expansion, while the vogue lasts, to make his Anthropophili a force in world public opinion."

"As if any dictator ever cared a hoot for world public opinion! You didn't see these gnomes or whatever the hell they're supposed to be?"

"No, but I heard them. Nearly busted my eardrums. I'd say to go ahead with the loan."

"Willy," growled my boss, "you've got a thing or two to learn about the lengths to which people will go to get their hands on the other guy's money. How do you know all that racket wasn't a recording, played over a loudspeaker?"

"Unh," I said. "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe you're just being too suspicious."

"Any time somebody wants to borrow half a million bucks on the pretext that he has spooks or fairies working for him, you're damned right I'm suspicious. What's the name of Owens's cult again?"

"The Anthropophili."

"Doesn't that mean 'man-eaters' or 'cannibals'?"

"No, you're thinking of Anthropophagi.' I think this name means 'lovers of man.'"

"Maybe they love man the way I love a good steak. Now, you go back and tell 'em: if you don't see their alleged gnomes, it's no deal."

"They say their workers — whatever they are — are touchy about letting people see them."

"That's their problem. You do as I say."

Next morning, when Owens and Bellamy came to the motel, I delivered Drexel's ultimatum. Again, Bellamy seemed about to burst with suppressed rage. Owens soothed him.

"Never mind, Forrest. 'Even the gods cannot strive against necessity.'" To me he said, "You understand, Mr. Newbury, that there may be certain — ah — difficulties in dealing with these beings? There might even be some risk."

"I'm not worried," I said.

Overnight, I had become half-converted to Drexel's suggestions that the noise was from a recording. In any case, I was ninety-eight percent certain that the workers, if any, would prove to be ordinary mortal men.

Back at the Oecus, Owens again unlocked the iron door in the pit.

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As we descended, I noticed a difference. The metallic clangor, instead of starting faintly as we entered the tunnel and slowly rising to an earsplitting din, was missing. There was a faint susurration, which grew to the sound of a multitude of bass voices, all talking at once. But this time, there was no anvil chorus.

My companions noticed it, too. Owens and Bellamy stopped to confer in low tones.

"Are they taking a coffee break?" I asked.

"Dunno," said Bellamy. "They sure ain't doing what they're supposed to."

"Some emergency must have arisen," said Owens. "Perhaps an accident. We shall know when we get there."

We entered the vestibule. The noise was loud, although nothing compared to the previous uproar. Owens said:

"You and I shall wait here, Mr. Newbury, while Forrest goes ahead to make the arrangements."

"You mean to get these trolls' permission to bring me in?"

"Quite. Sit down and relax; this may require some time."

Owens and I sat. Bellamy disappeared into a passage at the far end of the chamber. This passage was angled so that one could not, from the vestibule, look into the working space beyond.

The rumble of voices died to near-silence. I heard Forrest Bellamy's voice, too muffled to tell what he was saying. Then the bass voices rose again. I still could not identify the language.

Owens and I sat and sat. Owens spoke of his ideals and his grandiose plans for the Anthropophili. At last he took out his watch.

"There must be more difficulty than I anticipated," he said. "I'll give Forrest another quarter-hour."

We sat for fifteen minutes more. Then, with another look at his watch, Owens rose.

"I shall have to take a look myself," he said. "Please remain where you are, Mr. Newbury. You must *not* attempt to follow me without instructions. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

Owens disappeared into the same passage that had swallowed Bellamy. The vocal noises died down briefly and then rose again.

I waited another quarter-hour. The temptation to sneak a look into the cave was strong, but I withstood it. I have the normal quota of curiosity and perhaps a bit more; but with a wife and three children at home, I did not care to let curiosity kill this particular cat.

Then the noises rose sharply. I thought I recognized the sound of an angry mob.

Colin Owens popped out of the

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passageway. His hair was awry, he had lost his glasses, he bled from a scratch on his face, and his coat lacked one sleeve.

"Run for your life!" he cried as he scampered past me.

I leaped from the chair and caught up with him in a few strides. Being much bigger than he, twenty years his junior, and in good physical trim for a man of my middling years, I could have left him far behind. Instead, I grabbed his arm and boosted him along. Even so, he had to stop now and then to catch his breath.

Behind us, the sound of voices mingled with the slap and tramp of many feet, running through the tunnel.

"Keep on!" gasped Owens. "They'll pound us — sledge hammers —"

I doubled my efforts to manhandle the little man along. The next time he stopped for breath, he gasped: "That idiot — should have gone in sooner myself — serves him bloody right ..."

Then the lights went out. Owens uttered a shrill cry: "Oh, my God!"

"Put your hand out and feel the wall," I said. "Pick up your feet!"

The footsteps and the rumbling cries intensified. I could see nothing. When we came to the place where the passage sloped up, I stumbled and almost fell. I thought: this is it. With a desperate effort, I got my feet under me again and ran on.

Brushing the wall, we jogged up the slope, while the sounds of pursuit came ever louder. Something whirled through the air behind us, to strike the stony wall and rebound to the floor with a clatter. While I could not see the missile, a thrown sledge hammer would have made such a sound.

"I'm done," wheezed Owens. "Go Mr. Newbury. Save yourself."

"Nonsense!" I said. I scooped up Owens and carried him like a child. Luckily he did not weigh much over a hundred.

In my imagination, I could almost feel the breath of our pursuers. Any minute, I expected a hammer to come down on my skull.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, a little dot of gray appeared ahead. I recognized it as a bend in the tunnel, near the exit. The short leg between the door and this bend was lit by the sunlight outside.

The gray spot grew larger and took rectangular shape. Then we were around the bend and through the door, blinking in the sunshine. I put Owens down and collapsed on the bricks. Owens shut the door, locked it, and stood over me.

"It's all right," he said. "They are allergic to sunlight and hate to expose themselves to it. You saved my life."

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When I got my breath back and my racing heart slowed down, I asked, "What happened?"

"Forrest came in on a union organization meeting. He got into an argument with the would-be leader, and he has — had — a violent temper. He was foolish enough to strike the — the organizer. My workers, also, are rather short-tempered, and the next I knew, they were all over him with hammers and other implements. When I saw his brains spattered, I jolly well ran for it."

"What now? Whom do you notify?"

"I shall take care of that, never fear. Your business is finished here, Mr. Newbury. Obviously, my great dream will have to await a more propitious occasion. Let me drive you back to the motel."

Although usually loquacious, Owens was silent on the return trip. While I was curious about his plans, he answered the questions evasively until I stopped asking.

That evening, I reported to Drexel. Next day, I heard nothing from the Oecus. Their telephone did not answer. I finally made an airplane reservation and called a taxi. On a whim, I told the driver to detour to the Oecus on the way to the airport.

The house had overnight become a deserted ruin. Of Colin Owens and his followers there was no sign. The place looked as if a gang of vandals had gone through it with crowbars and hammers.

Every window was broken. Furniture was thrown about and smashed. Wall fittings had been ripped out and floor boards pried up. Some of the plaster had been battered from the walls. Rugs had been ripped or fouled. Such a wreck was the building that it was dangerous even to walk about it, for fear of falling through the floor or having something collapse on one.

I went out back and looked into the pit. The iron door had been broken open and torn from its hinges. It lay on the bricks, crumpled like a piece of tinfoil.

I remembered Owens's saying that his workers avoided sunlight, but that would not have stopped them from coming out at night to raid the Oecus. Whether they had caught any members of the Anthropophili, I could not tell. I saw no bloodstains in the ruin, but there was nobody about to answer questions. Could the cult members have inflicted this destruction themselves, before abandoning their headquarters?

I even wondered if the whole thing had been an hallucination or a dream. But there had been nothing imaginary about the application for his loan, with supporting documents, which Owens had sent in, or about my visit to Atlanta. The

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only way to straighten things out would have been to invade the tunnel again, but I was neither brave nor determined enough to embark upon such an adventure. Besides, I had a plane to catch.

I suppose I ought to have reported to the state police. But I could not imagine explaining to a trooper that I had been chased through a tunnel under Stone Mountain by a mob of infuriated gnomes.

Besides, there was the bank's reputation to consider. Nobody wants to leave his money with an institution run by *hallucines*. Although my inaction has nipped my conscience since, it is one of the things one must learn to live with, along with the memory of the other follies and blunders of a normally active life.

When I reported back to Esau Drexel, he said, "Well, Willy, you know I'm no goddamn pink liberal. But I've got to admit that labor unions are here to stay. Even the elves, gnomes, and other hobgoblins have 'em!"

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Raylyn Moore offers a chilling story about Bryce and Bobbie Bleamer, whose weary search for the ultimate experience ends in a surprising manner.

The House Sitters

by RAYLYN MOORE

Because the Bleamers (Bryce and Bobbie) had no children, no politics, no burning convictions, and no money problem (Bryce was the second son of a mattress fortune put out at a modest remittance because he had no head for business), they had one hell of a time figuring out a suitable life style. This was especially troublesome because they wanted to continue living in California, where failure to achieve some kind of identity was (social) death.

They tried Scientology, but the meetings bored the bejeesus out of them; they took up nudity in the Santa Cruz mountains, but when winter came the colony scattered to most points of the compass. They stumbled into and out of Christianity, mountain climbing, and Hari Krishna, but Bryce couldn't accept the historicity of Jesus, Bobbie couldn't stand heights, and neither of them could abide, on aesthetic grounds, the look of a saffron dhoti.

As new members of the Sexual Freedom League they got themselves accepted into a plural marriage occupying the whole of a Victorian mansion in Berkeley. But the second week they were there a domestic squabble arose over which TV channel to watch. The trouble finally had to be quelled by the cops. Bobbie and Bryce only by sheerest chance escaped being taken off to jail with the rest.

Some acquaintances, a couple named Ruspenski, invited them to stay at the Ruspenski house in Carmel Highlands while the owners vacationed in the Orient. What was wanted was just someone on deck to look after things so the house (a genuine Mies) wouldn't be left standing empty to attract vandals, arsonists, pipe-bombers, youth groups and godknewwhat.

Because they were fresh out of

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ideas, the Bleamers accepted. They took scrupulous if not loving care of the two vile-tempered Rottweilers, whose kennel was a precise replica of the main house, and skimmed the flotsam off the swimming pool. They kept the filter working, swept the patio, and brought in the mail. True, they gave a party during which a trayful of Waterford wineglasses belonging to the Ruspenskis was smashed, but over all the Bleamers' caretaking left such a favorable impression that the Ruspenskis upon their return recommended Bryce and Bobbie for a similar job in a house (by Gropius) cantilevered from a cliff farther down the coast.

After that, one thing led rapidly to another. One month the Bleamers might find themselves adjusting to the straight lines and paneled walls of a Louis XVI interior, and the next to the curves and gilt and silver leaf of the Regence, or to the sybaritic functionalism and flickering colors of postcontemporary. Besides antiques, art objects, and valuable architecture, they were entrusted with poodles, marmosets, mynahs, Dobermans, peafowl, and once a lion cub who during the Bleamers' tenure seemed suddenly to shoot up out of playful infancy into uneasy adolescence.

Requests were soon pouring in, so there was ample choice of houses to caretake, and every time they changed houses they gave a party. They were soon established as a far-out couple. Invitations to these bashes in some of the grooviest houses up and down the coast were taken seriously by those who received them and coveted by those who did not.

Early in the game it had occurred to Bobbie to wonder, "Couldn't this be it, baby, what we've been looking for?" And Bryce agreed maybe it was. The limited moral obligation of house sitting (limited in time, at least) appealed to Bryce's essential lack of responsibility, and the kaleidoscopic scene changes to Bobbie's innate restlessness. It seemed that by making it a point to belong nowhere they had come to belong somewhere. Like seasoned actors they had acquired identity by taking on successionally a proliferation of identities belonging to others.

And identity was now less than ever to be regarded lightly, for the Bleamers — though all their friends agreed they were beautiful people — were by this time neither very young nor especially attractive.

Bryce was pushing forty and inclined to overweight and other excesses. Because someone had once told him he looked like a vicar (a resemblance presumably having to do with his round-cheeked and somewhat dewy boyish face), he

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had sought to enhance the effect by wearing baggy dark clothing, smoking a pipe, and letting his hair grow raggedly over his collar while remaining otherwise cleanshaven and neatly trimmed.

Bobbie was one of those pale, thin blondes whose youthful prettiness subsides after thirty-five without being replaced by any look of serenity or wisdom. At one time she had been a model, but not a serious, dedicated one. Modeling hadn't held her attention long enough. Neither had anything else, unless it counted that she had always felt an inchoate yearning for green and growing things. The yearning had not, however, developed into a real interest; she'd never even gardened. And only after the Bleamers became professional house sitters charged with caring for the gardens of others did she earn a reputation among their clientele for being "good with plants."

But it was enough to account for their being invited one year to live in and keep up the bachelor establishment of a fussy exobotanist named Belkler.

For the far-out Bleamers were by this time so deep into their chosen life they had scarcely noticed that the jobs themselves were getting farther and farther out, geographically and otherwise. Even at the outset they had not really known the Ruspenskis very well, much less the friends of friends of friends who had followed in the tangled grapevine of the numerous referrals. The home of a dean emeritus would give way to that of a retired chairman of the board, and that in turn to a house owned by a movie star, or distinguished mafioso, or (in one case) a retired madame, owner of six Utrillos, a Kandinsky, and a pet anaconda curled in an atmosphere-controlled glass cage in a summerhouse. (Later it was not really held against the Bleamers that a power mower somehow got away from Bryce and slammed into the summerhouse, shattering the herpetarium and allowing its occupant to slither lazily away before the full extent of damage was discovered.)

"Recently, however, I have begun to wonder if there isn't something more to life," remarked Bobbie as she sat in their Belkler solarium smoking something she'd found in a humidor. "I mean, after you've seen one wealthy eccentric's house, you've seen them all, right? In the end everybody's secret turns out to be that there isn't any secret. And, yet, isn't there something more? Can this be all there is?"

It was their first day in Belkler's house. Belkler himself they had never seen. He had left the evening before on a six-month journey to an unnamed destination. Bobbie knew

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he was fussy, however, from the general tone of a list of instructions he had left about caring for the masses of tropical ferns and succulents (or whatever they were) arranged on glass shelves around the solarium, giving the huge room, which was two stories high, the marine-green cast of sunlight oozing through chlorophyll.

True to her inclinations, Bobbie approved of the plants, even though caretaking them was going to require more time than she might have hoped. Morning and evening they were to be treated with a fluid of murky orchid hue in a big glass bottle to which was attached a rod sprayer of the kind used for weedkiller and liquid fertilizer.

But now it was afternoon, not the time of day to spray the plants, and Bobbie wasn't even thinking about them. She was waiting for some reply from Bryce on her philosophical remarks. After several minutes she deduced he wasn't going to comment, so she changed the subject. "What *is* an exobotanist, anyhow, do you suppose?"

"Some kind of botanist," explained Bryce, who was experiencing total immersion in the Belkler library, which occupied part of the single interior wall of the solarium and was its only other furishing beside the plants and a few rattan lounges. This library, Bryce had discovered, was superb. Not only had Belkler glommed onto splendid editions of all the classics (*Night in a Moorish Haren, My Life and Loves, Apartment House Management, Memoirs of a Russian Princess*), there were also dozens of titles Bryce had never heard of.

"But what does he actually *do*?" persisted Bobbie.

"Mmmmm. Specializes in some branch of botany," supplied Bryce, who was by now only nominally there in the solarium, his true presence having been wafted off to a Sudanese palace lighted with smoking torches, perfumed exotically, and peopled with powerful Nubian slaves in chains and naked dancing girls snapping braided whips embedded with glass slivers.

Bobbie shrugged and abandoned the end of her roach in a dingy pewter ashtray. (The stuff didn't seem to give her any kind of buzz, though she had had high hopes because of its odd look in the canister: tightly twisted leaf pellets, slightly oily looking.) She rose restively and began strolling around the glass room, spelling out the words neatly penned in verdant ink on small, metal-bound tags attached to each of the plants.

Ficus fantasticus was an ungainly, gnarled plant with flopping leathery limbs (or were they leaves?), and *arales xenomundo* had feathery, cream-colored foliage studded with bright red thorns like

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darning needles. *Aconitum horribum*, she read as she passed on down the room. *Cereus priapus*.

Bobbie Bleamer's feeling for plants did not of course extend to a knowledge of them, though she probably knew as much about plants as anything else. (In her student days she had conscientiously tried to learn as little as possible about a wide range of subjects.) Anyway, her impression on this first tour of the labels on the Belkler botanical collection was that Belkler was just another freak, though it was a relief to be caretaking for a plant freak for a change after so many animal ones.

As Bobbie was thinking this, an overwhelming emanation seemed to flow toward her out of the surrounding foliage. Not precisely an odor, nor was it a rush of air, or a noise. She thought it more like an electrical force. It felt lovely, indescribably lovely; few things in her previous experience — diversified as it had been — could compare. And the best part wasn't the sensation itself but the promise it brought. Joints turned to gelatin, Bobbie peered into the greenery all around and was convinced something wonderful was about to happen. It was as if she had been elected to watch the sealed lips of some ineffable icon crack after eons of silence and pour out the secret of the universe.

Added to this sense of expectation was a visual enhancement which caused every leaf, frond, bud and bloom to scintillate in its own pure light. Bobbie had the further impression that she too was giving off light, scintillating back at them.

When she returned to the world, she found herself supine on one of the rattan lounges staring at the rotunda ceiling. It seemed to be afternoon of the same day. She glanced across at Bryce, who occupied one of the other lounges, but he was still deep in his own trip with the books, noticing nothing.

She deduced now that she had been wrong earlier, that whatever kind of weed Doctor Belkler smoked was not without virtue. She wondered if there might be enough of the stuff to go around when they gave their next party.

Later that evening, when Bobbie was again on the solarium lounge and making a first draft of a guest list, she once more felt a strangeness, though not the same as the strangeness of the afternoon. She was alone. Since getting involved in the library, Bryce hadn't been much company; he had already retired to read in the master bedroom on the opposite side of the house.

Bent over her list, which she held under an art nouveau lamp with stainedglass shade and bead

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fringe, Bobbie detected coming from somewhere in the otherwise dark room a faint movement, a kind of subdued shifting. This time she had been smoking nothing. "That you, baby?" she inquired, but the question was just for the record. She knew Bryce hadn't come into the room.

All the same, she waited as long for an answer as she would have if she'd really expected one and then turned slowly — head and shoulders at once, the way people do in fright — and looked behind her.

Nothing to be seen except the tiers of plants on their glass shelves, their numerous hues of green and other colors showing an unrelieved black now, blending into the obsidian backdrop which the walls had become with the arrival of moonless night.

Bobbie breathed in shallow gulps, as if the thrill of terror were real, and she thought: Wow! If only the house turns out to be haunted, we could have the party out here and watch for the ghost. Immediately there crossed her mind the names of a couple she and Bryce knew who had worked on a parapsych project for Stanford Research. Thoughtfully she picked up her pen and addded the names to her list.

She then sat quietly in the solarium a full hour more, waiting for something else to happen, but nothing did. And by next morning she was no longer sure anything had in the first place. She therefore did not mention the experience to Bryce.

Several days passed without much going on. The Belkler assignment, Bobbie reflected, might have been more lively if people could have dropped in, but this house was hard to find, not on the beach cliffs this time, but far back in the Santa Lucia coast range, at the end of a long private lane, not a neighbor in miles.

All the more reason to get on with the party, except now Bobbie had to delay while she accomplished a subsidiary project. There had proven after all to be not enough of Doctor Belkler's good grass to go around for guests. However, all was not lost. During one of the sessions of treating the plants, Bobbie had made a useful discovery, a thriving clump of growth in one corner plainly marked *cannabis novela.*

Not that it looked the way one would expect. The large leaves were rounded and glossy, the stems thick as a human forearm at the main trunk. Together these plants were easily the most luxuriant growth in the room.

The main problem now had become not one of acquisition, nor even of ethics, but of concealment. Without permission it would

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scarcely do to harvest leaves at random. Such theft could be too easily detected by the owner when he returned. Bobbie decided the only way to proceed would be to steal a single whole plant, chopping it at its base and later removing the evidence of the trunk and roots from the peatmoss (or whatever it was) in which the plants grew. There were so many of the plants — at least twenty-five — that the total disappearance of one wouldn't be nearly so obvious as the stripping of leaves from a number.

Which would be least likely to be missed? Hasty logic would seem to suggest one from the rear. On second thought Bobbie grew more canny, reasoning that trying to perform such a major operation so far back in the crowded growth would be clumsy, resulting in damage to the front plants too.

In the end she chose a plant which, although it was in front and easily accessible, was neither among the tallest nor the most spectacular of the specimens. The stem was almost spindly at the place where she would cut it through, and though the leaves were numerous, the main growth had occurred to one side of the stem, rendering the plant asymmetrical, like a Christmas tree off the reject pile. Yes, this one was surely expendable, and anyway the plants could do with a culling.

So she was actually doing a favor for Belkler, Bobbie reminded herself next morning when she was ready to do the job. Thoughtfully, tentatively, she touched the shining leaves of the plant she'd chosen, ran a hand down its trunk.

The moment suddenly became far too cluttered with unexpected occurrences for her to sort out cause and effect until later. The large glass bottle of plant food (or whatever it was) which had stood on a dolly behind her and with which she had been spraying as usual, seemed to explode against the terrazzo floor with great force. Simultaneously, Bobbie herself became once again enrapt, this time in an even more beautiful, frankly orgasmic sensation which she hoped would never end.

It did end, however, as soon as she stepped back from the plant she had touched. The sensation had been generated by contact with the fleshy stem of the cannabis, and the explosion of the bottle by her surprised leap backward, which had knocked the huge container off the dolly.

Very soon it came to her that the accident was probably rather serious. Belkler's convoluted instructions hadn't said what was in the plant spray or what its purpose was (watering was done separately by an automatic sprinkler system), only warning that the spray *abso-*

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lutely must be applied at the prescribed times. Presumably the bottle had held enough of the solution to last through Belkler's absence. At least she'd seen no other such bottle around.

These unsettling thoughts were enough to mute considerably any euphoric aftereffect of the other experience. For otherwise Bobbie might have run shouting through the house, calling out to Bryce, "This is it! The living end! Come touch the cannabis and live!" For the time forgetting on how many other occasions one or the other of them had come across the ultimate experience, the answer to everything (astrology, Marcuse, mescaline, psi, chiropractic, Fanon, health food, Cayce, syncretism, hatha yoga, Merton), and then found it was a mistake after all.

Anyway, instead of celebrating the discovery of the sensational plant, Bobbie pulled herself together. She looked at the wreckage around her and reminded herself there was nothing to be gained by crying over spilt plant formula. What had happened had happened. She'd go on tending the plants as best she could, seeing they continued to get plenty of light and water, hoping they wouldn't be too much the worse. (Needless to say, the shadowy Belkler had left no forwarding address.)

Meanwhile, she further reasoned, the accidental event had in no way precluded bringing off the planned one. There seemed nothing to stop her from going ahead, cutting down the plant and harvesting the leaves.

She drew from the pocket of her denim gardening apron a linoleum knife she'd found in the back of a kitchen drawer. This time when she laid hold of the stem, bringing the knife blade toward it, instead of a thrill she felt a strong pull, a muscular surge as if the plant were trying to draw away.

Crazy, she thought, and gritted her teeth and hacked.

There was another writhing surge, this one accompanied by the sound of screaming, which must be coming from herself as there was no one else around. Then she was actually wrestling, getting the worst of it for a while, but finally, gradually, as she still hacked and sawed with the knife, becoming the winner as the stem was severed and the plant collapsed onto its side with a low final moan. Bobbie sank to her knees on the terrazzo, panting and retching and feeling faint.

For during the struggle some uncharacteristically alert and analytical part of her mind was interpreting the experience. Far too late she knew she had committed a terrible violation. And she had only a second to look up at the fallen plant and its severed stump, now wet

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with a curious, dark-red suppuration, and mutter, "Forgive me!" before Bryce came running in with his, "Migod, baby, what's going on in here?"

Again Bobbie pulled herself together. She explained about accidentally knocking over the bottle. She showed Bryce the cut plant and explained that she planned to cure it for the party (because once again, even knowing what she now knew, she could see no reason *not* to go ahead; there was no way to undo what had been done, no way to make the mutilated plant whole again).

Bryce helped her clean up the mess and together they stripped the leaves from the cut stem. Then they dug up the bleeding stump and disposed of it and the bare stem in the kitchen garbage. But since, during these operations, Bryce seemed to notice nothing unusual, Bobbie again decided to say nothing more. Yet. There was still the bare chance that what had happened was a drama of the imagination and that all they were really doing was ripping off a little grass that the owner would never miss or, if he did, would forgive them for. Just as the Ruspenskis had forgiven them the busted wineglasses. (And the retired madame her shattered snake house.)

The processing was easy. In Belkler's small kitchen Bobbie tuned the electric oven to 190°F, and inserted the great heaps of leaves and bits of secondary stem piled on cookie sheets. She had no idea what the usual curing process was, and hoped that artifical application of heat wouldn't interfere with potency in the final product. The stuff certainly looked all right when she drew it out six hours later. Even shrunk as the mass had become through dehydration, it amounted to almost half a kilo, Bobbie estimated. The lopsided plant had been wonderfully luxuriant.

Bryce came into the kitchen during this final step in the processing. He leaned against the wall mouthing an unlit pipe and suggested they might try to shape their product into a brick to make it look more professional, but Bobbie didn't see why they couldn't leave that part out. She was tired after all the tension and exertion and glad of the prospect of falling into bed without having to spend the usual hour spraying plants.

But it was that night, at something past midnight, when their real problem began.

Bobbie awoke with Bryce elbowing her sharply. "Whassat noise, baby?"

"How should I know?"

"Sounds like it's coming from the greenhouse."

"The solarium? Yes, I guess it

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is." Bobbie listened to a sound of soft bumping from the far side of the house, as if someone were moving furniture but trying to be surreptitious about it. "It's the cat," she finally decided.

"Cat's right here," Bryce corrected her, nodding to the foot of the bed, where Belkler's only pet, a muscle-bound Tonkinese tom, lounged in a bulky crescent.

"Then maybe you should go and check," she said brightly, fully alert now.

"What?"

"In the solarium. To see what's making the noise."

"Yeah, sure. Okay, baby." He was shrugging into a dark silk dressing gown a size too small, a possession of the exobotanist.

She waited an unconscionably long time for him to return to the bedroom. Just when she was growing annoyed enough to go after him, he came back, a bit pale but composed.

"Well, what was it?"

"I don't know."

"But — didn't you *look* in the solarium?"

Bryce was sliding back into bed. "No," he said. "But I locked the sliding doors from there into the main part of the house. Whoever it is is trapped till morning, unless they want to take a flyer out through the glass."

"That was a very stupid thing to do, baby." She decided the time had come to tell him everything. "But I suppose we can handle it that way till we think of something else." She gave Bryce a full description of all that had happened from that first afternoon, concluding with her own theory (which she'd just thought of) about what had been in the big glass bottle.

"I think it was tranquilizer of some kind. You know, something to keep the plants sedated so they wouldn't — cause trouble."

"Wow!" said Bryce. "And since they've missed the usual dosage this morning and tonight, they're getting jumpy. So what happens now?"

Bobbie shrugged. "More of the same, I suppose. Maybe they'll get more and more restless until they reach a peak and level off." She had no reason for assuming this, of course, but when it came out, she thought it sounded convincing. And since, between them, she was the acknowledged authority on plants, evidently Bryce was convinced too.

"What do we do meanwhile?" he wanted to know.

"Since you've gone and locked the doors, I suppose we should just keep them locked. Stay away from that part of the house. The water goes on automatically. The plants'll be all right."

And that's what the Bleamers did. Or tried to. The sliding doors

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were heavy oak, perhaps designed for just suck an exigency which would call for sealing off the solarium. In the morning of that first, day, the bumping sounds dwindled, then stopped. They did not resume until the next night. Presumably through the daylight hours the plants rested and manufactured chlorophyll as usual.

When Bryce and Bobbie went out and peered from the garden into the glass rotunda, they saw nothing amiss, just the rows and rows of botanical specimens sunning themselves inside.

The noises were far worse the second night, however, and the Bleamers got very little sleep. The only reassuring thing was that the thumping didn't seem directed against the locked doors. At least, Bobbie thought, nothing was trying to get out.

But she was forced to change her mind the following night, for by then the bumps *were* being directed against the door from the inside. Mumpph-mumpph-mumpph. A slow but regular beat, as if made by a battering ram well-swathed in quilts.

After much awkward shoving and hauling, the Bleamers managed to reposition a heavy armoire so that it sat across the double doors as a barricade.

In all the excitement Bobbie forgot to mail the invitations to the party, even almost forgot she was planning a party. (Who needed a party? Weren't they having enough diversion?) She did not, however, forget about the cured leaves, which still lay on one of the kitchen counters. And on the morning of the third day Bobbie told Bryce she'd had a great idea.

It had come to her the previous night as she lay sleepless, listening to the still-muffled but ever more insistent sounds from across the house. It was such a simple notion she wondered at not having thought of it earlier.

What Bobbie Bleamer did not know about theology would, of course, fill great libraries, but she did have a hazy apprehension of the concept of absolution and how to get it. She was fairly certain that if the person who commits the sin makes atonement, then the consequences of the sin are removed.

That evening, she told Bryce, before anything started in the solarium, she would go in, settle herself on one of the lounges, and smoke some of the grass that she had cut down with her own hand. Then they would see. If she was successful, then the problem of the night restlessness among the plants should be over. It would be like eating the god, she explained, like taking communion.

Bryce offered to come too but she said no, it was her responsibility

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and she would see it through. (Actually, she was being selfish. She had always known in her heart that Bryce wasn't nearly the swinger she herself was and in this case was afraid he might be something of a drag.)

At dusk she allowed him to help her shove the armoire aside, trying (for his sake) not to show how exhilarated she had become with anticipation. For it seemed to her now that what lay ahead just might, finally, be *it*, the ultimate, the end-game, played for blood after a lifetime of playing for kicks.

She was ready.

And then she was actually there, relaxed on the lounge, letting the rich smoke curl away into the deepening green jungle around her.

Nothing moved, and sure enough, after a while a sense of peace came such as she had not felt before. At the back of her mind flitted imperfect recollections of those medieval paintings of nuns eating hunks of raw meat. She reached for a roach holder in order to extract the last virtue from the pungent smoke.

In the morning it was the resounding crash of unusual silence which woke Bryce. He had been deeply asleep for hours, the sleep unpunctuated by any noises from across the house. So Bobbie had been right.

The thought of Bobbie got him out of bed immediately without his customary stretching and procrastinating. She must still be with the plants, since she hadn't returned to bed. He got into Belkler's dressing gown in such haste that he split the back seam.

More deep silence awaited him at the end of the house where the plants were. He called, "Baby?" At first softly, approaching the double doors, now unlocked. Then louder as he entered the glass room. And with increasing volume until the call was a shout, a scream.

But there was never an answer.

Coming next month

"Insects In Amber," a fine new novelet by **Tom Reamy** (author of "The Detweiler Boy" and "San Diego Lightfoot Sue"). Also, a new Rev. Crispin Mobey story by **Gary Jennings** entitled "Kingdom Come," the most hilarious in the series. The January issue is on sale December 1.

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Here is the second and concluding part of Charles Harness's new novel, a post-holocaust thriller whose suspense does not let up until the very end. The serial will be published in book form by Berkley in early 1978.

Wolfhead

(2nd of 2 parts)

by CHARLES L. HARNESS

Synopsis of Part One: My name is Jeremy Wolfhead, and I am writing this so that the events of the prophecies may be properly recorded before they fade from me completely.

Three hundred years ago my ancestor Fallowt Wolfhead learned (probably from the Brothers) that radiation along the Lantick shores was no longer lethal. He left the Mispi River and trekked east with his family, his goods, and his animals, and settled at Horseshoe Bay.

My father disappeared some weeks before my entry into the world. He got in his floater, headed across Horseshoe Bay, and was never seen again. My mother died soon after I was born, and grandfather (of Wolfhead and Company, Restorations) raised me. As a youth I attended the New Bollamer Collegia, but I much preferred to steal away on hunting trips. On one such escapade I chased a giant stag to the Spume, a colossal steam geyser, and lost it there to dire wolves.

I met Beatra at the Winter Ball. We honeymooned at the manor at Horseshoe Bay. Early one dark morning we went up to the cliff edge to watch the "gods-eye" orbit skyward over the sea rim. We were attacked by Undergrounders, led by their President. The Undergrounders were the legendary residue of the United States Government that had gone underground three thousand years ago, just before the Desolation. They kidnapped Beatra, killed Goro, my hound, and left me for dead.

Prompt surgery by the Brothers saved my life. I discovered that my head blow had activated certain latent psi talents. I could now communicate telepathically, and with the Brother's training I was able to form destructive vortices of whirling solid matter. These new skills would be indispensable when I went underground to rescue Beatra, particularly since the Brothers informed me that the Undergrounders had weapon-detecting beams at the grotto entrance. The Brothers knew

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this because one man, the Returner, had actually gone underground and come out again — as a human wreck, for they cut out his tongue and sewed up his lips as a warning to the rest of us.

According to the Returner, it was semidark underground. The eyes of the Undergrounders had adjusted to this gloom over the centuries, but I would need assistance. The dire wolf can see in total darkness. I found a young female dire wolf (I named her Virgil, after the guide of the Prophet Dante during his descent into Hell), and the Brothers planted a piece of my brain within hers, so that we could communicate telepathically.

Father Phaedrus, of the Brothers, summoned me to his deathbed. He bared to me all his prior telepathic contact with the Returner. Then he prophesied: "The Brothers exist only to send you underground. There, you must destroy the gods-eye, or it will destroy all surface life. One civilization will live; one will die. Within twenty-four hours your vortectic powers will fail forever."

The abbot took Virgil and me out to the Grottoes in my floater and dropped us into the surf. Within the sea-cave we were attacked by a sea-crocodile, which I blinded with a sand-vortex. We proceeded down the cavern to a gate, which I opened by vortectically creating a electric current in its servomechanism.

In our further progress downward we killed six guards and learned that Beatra was being held at the White House. We encountered a police floater and lured the occupants out with a man-shaped dust vortex that seemed to run across its path. We killed the police, stole the floater, and soon found the White House. As we arrived, Beatra was being dragged into a waiting ship. The floater gate was heavily guarded, and there was no way to get our ship inside the grounds. I set it afire, crashed it into the gate, and amid the confusion, Virgil and I slipped into the grounds through a side door. Beatra's ship was moving slowly out over the gaping void of the exit shaft, but its door was still open and the tongue-board was out. We ran for the door and landed on the tongue-board just as the door closed in my face. I saw Beatra on the other side of the glass. "Jeremy!" she screamed. The President pulled a lever and the tongue-board whistled into the side of the ship. Virgil and I began to fall in the darkness.

16. The River

I thought: what a moronic way to die. Crushed on the hard limestone floor of this monstrous shaft. I had been so close, and now it had all come to this.

Instinctively I brought my knees up under my chin, in the fetal position. I would die as I had been born, under protest. I remember doing this, and taking a deep sigh, perhaps in regret that I had failed Beatra, perhaps in self-pity for my untimely end. And then ... I struck something ... with an enormous *plack*. I was under water ... *way* under. And spluttering, and gasping, and clawing upward, and strangling. There was something down there with me. Virgil, of course. I got under her and pushed her upward with me through the dark water. After an age we broke the surface. She was uncon-

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scious. Perhaps even dead. I tried without success to make mental contact. I had lost one sandal; I kicked off the other. I held Virgil's head up while I treaded water and looked about.

Nothing. But at least I was no longer the total fatalistic failure that I had been seconds past, in midfall. I was alive again. Life was good, and I knew with certainty that I would find Beatra and bring her out again. Time had passed, and my precious twenty-four hours was fading, but the prophecies were still with me. I could do it.

Yet ... I had to think about what they intended to do with her now. Where were they taking her? What were they going to do to her? I shivered.

I squinted, wiped the water out of my eyes with my free hand, and peered out again.

Total darkness everywhere.

I looked up. Nothing there, either. Just more cold, wet blackness. The green lights of Beatra's ship had disappeared. Perhaps it had gone off into one of the intersecting corridors far above me. But how far above, and to what distance, I had no way of knowing. Perhaps the interrogation was over. Perhaps they were through with her, and they were now taking her for an indefinite stay in a close-security prison. Perhaps .... But I had to stop this. At the moment I could do nothing for her, and there were very immediate things I had to face here.

They knew now that they could be invaded. They knew I had done it. They knew why I had come, and they must soon discover how I had got as far as I had. The burning floater would be quickly identified; its patrol route would be carefully retraced. The bodies would be found. The guard post would next be checked, and more bodies would be found. And finally they would send a full platoon up the tunnel to the great grotto, and they would then know my exact path, from start to finish.

And now the big question. Would they assume that I had been killed in my long breathtaking fall, or would they come looking for me? There was no way to know for sure. They might follow us down, if only to confirm that there was no trace of us.

All of this passed through my mind in a flash. And it added up to this: we had to get out of here.

I was calm enough now to make a vortectic concentration. I lay on my back, with one arm under Virgil, and formed a large luminous sphere, some forty feet overhead. As my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I studied my furry friend. Her eyes were glazed and half shut. She was still unconscious, but she was breathing. She probably had a lot of water in her lungs. I would have to find some kind of flat surface to stretch her out and empty her lungs. I looked up and around. Light reflected back at us from a glistening, stalactite-festooned ceiling of a vast underground cavern. Off slightly to one side, a great hole in the ceiling marked the entrance way of the shaft through which we had fallen.

The pillars arising from the river bed puzzled me at first. All, or nearly all of them were paired. Each stalactite that hung from the ceiling was matched by a stalagmite that rose up beneath it. Some of the pairs were fused into one great pillar, which stood there as

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though given the task of supporting the ceiling. This much offered no mystery. I knew that stalactites and stalagmites were formed by water dripping from the ceiling over thousands of years. The origin of the stalactites hanging from the roof was easy to perceive. That of the stalagmites was not immediately evident; for as the water dripped into the river, it would not be possible to build up a corresponding column on the river bottom, because the drippings would simply be swept away. But in considering this, I got an insight into the majestic workings of time. The cavern had been formed first, probably by being washed out by water, millennia ago. Then the waters receded, and the cavern bottoms were left to dry. Then the stalactites and stalagmites began slowly to form, until they reached very nearly their present size. And *then*, through some huge convulsion of the earth's crust, perhaps only two or three millennia ago, the waters returned. And now man and wolf rode as chips on the water of geologic time.

But the most astonishing thing was this: the shaftway in the ceiling was very definitely moving, and, along with it, the adjacent cluster of stalactites that hung from the great cavern roof. That was quite impossible, of course, and the solution hit me soom enough, in a very literal sense. For we bumped against a large rock pinnacle thrusting up from the water. *We* — were moving.

We were in some sort of broad subterranean river.

The Returner had mentioned a river. The Brothers had even given it a name: the mythical Lethe. Well, it was no myth. It was real, and it was bad, because it was taking us farther from Beatra by the second.

Where did the river end? It was clearly below sea level. It couldn't empty into the sea. Was there some great subterranean ocean here that never filled? I asked the questions, but I found that I did not really want to know the answers. I wanted *not* to understand, but I *had* to understand. I forced myself to accept this dread knowledge. And now it was coming to me. This was the underground river by which the Returner had escaped, threading his way through the stone pillars in a stolen floater. This living fluid flowed down, down, to the molten vitals of the earth, there to suffer its great transformation. For it had to return again to the surface, this time as red-hot steam.

We were headed for the Spume.

I had a momentary vision of its titanic searing power. We would go up that holocaust column not as corpses, but as bits and pieces of overcooked flesh and shattered bone, to be strewn helter-skelter over miles of dreary landscape. And now I thought back to the night I had spent in the dead tree near the Spume, and how I had shoved a collection of bones from the branch crotch at my back, and how I had wondered how it had got there. Well, now I knew. Would I likewise conclude as buzzard bait, miles and hours away?

Despite the chill water, I found that I was perspiring profusely. We had to get out, immediately!

I swept the blackness from side to side with the light-ball, searching for a shore, a place to climb out and to try to revive my friend. I saw only a brooding

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forest of stone pillars, in front of me, to either side, and behind me.

I struck out for the nearest stalagmite and let the current hold us against its cold wet side for a little while. I brought the light near and examined the rock carefully. It tapered upward, smooth as ice, except for intermittent vertical striations, and it was almost as cold as ice. It seemed to terminate in a point. It offered nothing.

As I paused there, treading water in frustration, I began to notice ... the *vibrations*. Something was happening to the water. It was trembling. Strange ripples appeared on the surface, and here and there tiny white-crested wave tops appeared. I felt the stone pillar shaking. My heart seemed to rise to my throat and to stick there, pounding. Then the sounds came. At first it was a low crackling moan. Then, very quickly, it became a continuous booming groan, and it grew louder and louder. I cold not localize it. It seemed to be coming from everywhere at once.

Another temblor? A full-sized quake? I looked about in alarm.

I lofted the light sphere high overhead and swept the ceiling area immediately above us. The ball seemed to jiggle in sympathy with my own mental shudders.

There was a great limestone stalactite pointing down at our pillar. It seemed blurred. I shook my head quickly and looked again. It still seemed somehow out of focus. And then I knew why. It, too, was shuddering. As was every stalactite and stalagmite in the river. Each was vibrating cumbrously at its own subsonic frequency.

And at that moment there was a crack like a thousand thunderbolts, and I watched with total horror as the great stone dagger dropped toward us.

I was frozen in fear and dismay. And I might as well have been, because there was absolutely nothing I could do.

The stony point of the giant monolith crashed squarely into the top of its lower counterpart, hung there, still upright, massively casual, as though it intended to maintain that delicate, impossible balance forever, then began to fall lazily, *away* from us. The air around it began to shriek as it arced downward, slowly and gracefully at first, then faster, and finally irresistibly. It crashed into the water on the other side of our sheltering pillar, and there followed a flood of waves and spray, noisy and prolonged. But the water finally quieted, and it was over. Still holding Virgil, I paddled around to the fallen colossus. It took me a moment to make a new light-ball (the first one having collapsed during the excitement). The great pillar had broken in two and was lying on its side, with a considerable part of its surface out of the water. Judging from its apparent diameter and its angle of rest, I estimated the water depth here to be twelve to fifteen feet. The fallen mass was wet and slippery, but now its striations were nearly horizontal, rather than vertical, and actually offered handholds of a sort. By dint of much slipping and sliding I got Virgil up on top of it. I detected a strong heartbeat as I pulled her from the water. She was still very much alive. There should be some way to bring her around.

I stretched her out on her belly and

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began to press rhythmically on her back and sides. Water, amid froth and bubbles, gushed out of her muzzle and nostrils for the first couple of strokes. I kept it up. Soon the wheezings and gurglings began. The noise from her lungs quickly reached some sort of maximum, then gradually faded as the minutes passed. I called out to her from time to time, both mentally and orally. "Virgil! Wake up, wake up!"

Finally she groaned, opened her eyes, and sneezed. I stepped back and waited.

She got up groggily, looked around, and began to shake the water out of her coat. Her tail was last, and it sent a fine spray directly in my face. This, I knew, was deliberate. I sighed. Completely ignoring me, she began a slow full turn on the fallen rock, sniffing the air and turning her head this way and that. Her ears were pricked to a full alert.

I thought she was going to berate me, tell me how stupid I had been. But she merely said, "Do we have to have that silly light?"

I shrugged my shoulders and collapsed the light. It didn't really matter for the time being. Also, I sensed that she was leading up to something important and she wanted to minimize extraneous distractions.

With the light gone, the great cavern was totally dark and almost as still. At first I was partially blinded by the imaginary afterglow of the light sphere. This passed. Finally, I could see nothing, and I could hear nothing save the faint flow of the water past our rock.

She flashed a mental question, deceptively casual and matter-of-fact. "Can you hear it?"

And now I truly did feel stupid. I strained my ears. It was worse than useless. I could no longer detect even the water lapping around our precarious roost. "Hear *what?*" I demanded.

"That waterfall."

My spine tingled, and then I stiffened. The long and tortured drop of the river to the molten magma would of course start with a waterfall. Oh, let this not be! No shore in sight. Did Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, which now held us firm in its watery grasp, propose to dash us to death before expelling us up the Spume? This was death too close! It was not fair! I had to deny the whole thing. "No," I said, "I don't hear a waterfall."

"It's there. Relax. Stop making so much noise. Take your time, and listen again."

I faced downstream, held my breath, and listened. And waited. And now at long last I *could* hear something. A faint, almost subaudible moaning. My heart sank, and I wanted to moan with it. "Yes," I said glumly, "I hear it."

"If we try to swim out of here, we will be swept over the falls."

There was no point in explaining the Spume to her. The falls were bad enough. I simple said, "We absolutely have to get out, and the only way is to swim. Which shore." I demanded, "is closer?"

"We'll both be killed."

"Would you prefer to die of starvation?"

"There're fish in this river. Maybe I can catch some."

"Sure. Use your tail as bait."

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"You don't have to be crude."

"Sorry. Well, good-by, Virgil."

She looked up in alarm and accusation. "You'd leave without me?"

"Yes."

"Moosedung!" she flashed bitterly. "Well, wait just a minute." She gave a short yip, then listened intently. She tossed her head. "The closer shore is over there."

It was obviously an intuitive judgment, made merely on the basis of echoes. But I trusted it.

"How far?"

"A hundred yards."

I sucked in my breath. Quite a distance. There was indeed considerable risk. But, on the other hand, it was useless, even foolish, to remain. Aside from the fact that it was completely futile to sit forever on this lifeless rock, there were other, intangible dangers. For example, a bevy of floaters might be dropping down the shaft behind us at this very moment.

I was thinking aloud, not only to help me make a decision, but also to keep Virgil informed as to the various factors I was taking into consideration.

"There is," she observed dryly, "a still further, very important consideration."

"What is that?"

"Form your light again. Over there." She pointed with her muzzle.

I quickly made a glow sphere, high in the air in the general direction she indicated. And by its light I saw the great arching neck, loathsome white eyes above the barrel-size jaws, the glistening rows of teeth. Some sort of water dragon was sweeping down on us. Foam and spray were bursting ahead of its chest, like the bow wave on a ship. Its questing head was poised a good dozen feet above the water. The light didn't bother it at all. It was very likely totally blind and located its prey by sound and scent. Very likely this devil fed on smaller creatures, and these on still smaller. There must be a full chain of river life, supported by garbage and human waste dumped into Lethe by the people of Dis.

My hand jerked to first one holster, then the other. I had lost both electropistols.

And now, as on certain previous occasions of great danger, the duration of time (that flux so mysterious, yet so inexorable) suddenly slowed. Motion very nearly ceased. The horrid head stayed its downward swoop. A gush of foamy saliva hung suspended from the monster's chin.

I knew, of course, that time moves, does not languish upon the whim or pleasure of any mortal. I knew that it was my own sensibilities that had so remarkably accelerated in a reflex attempt to save my life.

I forced my mind into a fantastic effort of will. The light sphere shrank. It was now so hot that it turned blue and so brilliant that I could not bear to look at it directly. I was astonished. I had never made a heat-ball before. But I wasted no time in admiring the product of this great effort! I drove it straight into that gaping muzzle, into the pea-size brain, and out the other side. There was the instant stench of seared flesh, followed by a horrid, prolonged scream. The great neck began to thresh from side to side. It flailed at our fallen stalactite perch a

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couple of times. Even in the mindless act of dying it was still dangerous. Once the great body crashed back into the water so hard that the waves swamped us, and the foam struck the ceiling and poured back on us in torrents. Virgil and I slid off the rock and cowered in the water on the other side from the creature. The threshing continued for several minutes, then faded away. The great body was gone. It had either sunk beneath the water or had floated away.

I let the heat-point expand to a light-ball and looked about us. All seemed quiet.

"Come on," I said and struck out for the nearer shore. Virgil followed without a word. She knew what I was thinking: did this monster have a mate? Are there still others out there? I was quite content to leave the question hanging unanswered. And the best way to do that was to get out as quickly as possible.

Swimming crosscurrent always presents a curious illusion. Actually, you move in two directions. You move downstream right along with the current, while at the same time you are trying to swim at right angles to it. The resultant vector is a diagonal, but you don't realize this except with reference to fixed points on the stream bed or on the shore. Well, we couldn't see the shore, but we could see any number of stalagmites. And these seemed to be sweeping upstream at an ever-increasing velocity.

The sound of the falls was now becoming very loud — a full droning boom. We had made progress, but it was not possible to say how much. Perhaps we were halfway to the shore. I let the light-ball hover near an emergent column, and I signaled to Virgil to join me there in a moment's rest, while we let the current push us against the side of the rock. The river was now flowing very fast. Here and there were signs of white water. The moan of the falls drowned out everything.

Virgil was glum but stoical. She had already decided that we were not going to make it.

"Here we go," I said. I dove off into the current once more. She followed me. We went through a rapid before we ever knew it was coming, and we both went under for a few seconds. Then we were up again, battling. To my surprise, the light ball was still there when we re-surfaced.

It revealed the shore — a bare twenty yards away. I shouted in great elation, and we struck out for it.

And then my heart sank.

The shore — if such it could be called — was a sheer cliff of limestone, water-polished and glass-smooth. There was no horizontal edge where we might crawl out. I raised the light-ball higher as we struggled toward this illusory salvation. Now, I could see that there was indeed a ledge, some ten or twelve feet above the water, carved out, perhaps, when the river level was higher. Only ten feet, but way over our heads. It might as well have been a mile high.

If Virgil hadn't been there, I think I would have burst into tears. I might even have thought about ceasing this long and idiotic struggle, given myself up to the clamoring water, and looked to rejoining Beatra in death. But I wasn't given the opportunity to explore

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these dark, seductive thoughts. The paradox was lost on me at the moment, but actually we were saved by another disaster.

Virgil, still swimming grimly beside me, signaled succinctly: "Another ... *thing* ... is coming. Its mate, I think."

Defeat and fatigue were instantly tossed aside. I looked back, strangely unalarmed, as though my attention might have been invited to a curious geological formation, or to a larger than usual stone pillar. The reason for my lack of fear was that I was too tired to react properly. Exhaustion smothers fright.

The thing was perhaps a hundred yards upstream. I watched with interest the approach of the great lizard neck, the enormous muscles rippling under the wet black skin in a sort of lethal beauty. The jaws now opened wide in glittering anticipation. He — or she — swept gracefully down at us, as though there were no problem with the current at all.

There was one more stalagmite between us and the cliff shore. I motioned to Virgil to head for it. We reached the haven of the pillar and immediately I turned to face the demon. I condensed the light sphere to an acorn-size heat-ball. I shouted my defiance with all the strength of my lungs, and I crashed the ball into the base of the creature's skull from the rear. The searing ball interrupted its dazzling are but briefly as it passed through the brain and then zipped like a fiery-tongue through the open jaws, after which it struck the pillar not far over my head and rebounded into the air, where it hung, radiant, blue-hot, and vengeful, as though searching for other beasts to slay.

By that warlike glow we watched the passing of this second behemoth. The colossal neck dropped into the water, and there the current caught it. The creature tumbled over and over, and was swept away in seconds. Did it scream? Did it convulse in an incomprehending death agony? There was no way to know. All sound and all suffering yielded to the far greater torture and howls of the great river as it leapt toward the engulfing falls.

And now I looked overhead where the heat-ball had struck our stalagmite. There seemed to be a fist-size hole there. Ah! I had an immediate inspiration. A hole? But not *just* a hole. Rather, a way out. Salvation. Virgil watched me curiously as I tossed a handful of water at the hole. It sizzled, probably for two reasons. Firstly, it was still very hot. Secondly, the heat of the ball had converted some of the limestone into quicklime, which, when slaked with water, had given off considerable heat.

Farewell, falls! Farewell, Spume! Beatra, we are coming!

I looked over at the shore wall, estimated where we would strike it after we crossed the remaining yards of torrent, and then I added another couple of yards downstream to be on the safe side. Next I commanded the little ball of blue heat to strike the cliff wall where I expected to make contact, one foot above the waterline, then again, one foot higher, and then again and again, all the way up to the lip of the ledge. Afterward, I let the heat-ball expand into a light-ball, and I stationed

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it overhead. Next I formed a whirling sphere of water, and I carefully washed out each of the pockets I had made. Finally, I pulled my shoulder harness around Virgil's back and chest, and placed the terminal loop over my shoulder.

To get ready, I tried to take a few deep breaths. But the air was full of spray, and I had to spit out a mouthful. No matter. For the first time since striking the water, I felt almost cheerful. I signaled to Virgil: "We're going up the side of the wall."

We struck out through the crashing water together. We reached the wall by efforts that were superhuman and superwolf. And I was glad indeed that I had provided for some leeway in placing the bottom handholes. If I had placed them six inches farther upstream, we would have missed them, owing to the incredible strength of the current. I clung with both hands to the lowest slot a moment, panting and gasping, and spewing water out of my mouth and nostrils. Virgil was in much worse shape. The white water was pulling at her so strongly that the leather harness was stretched out taut as a steel rod. I moved up to the next grab hole. At least that got her head clear of the water. By the third hole, my shoulder was taking her full weight of seventy pounds, and it was slow going. I had to make rest stops of a couple of minutes between each set of holes. She was beginning to wheeze and gurgle. The straps had tangled across her throat and chest and were suffocating her. But I could do nothing about it. "Just a few more to go!" I signaled. She grunted. When I finally reached the top, she was on the verge of blacking out; and, for that matter, so was I. My arms and legs had turned to rubber.

I pulled her up onto the ledge, removed the straps, and then I crawled to the rear of the ledge and lay flat, pressing against the cliff side. After a moment, she joined me.

I dissolved the light sphere. For a long time we simply lay there on the cold wet stone surface, panting, wet, miserable, totally exhausted, and stupefied by the thunderous crashing of the falls. From its sound, it could not be more than a dozen yards away.

These waters would continue, in the ever-descending channel, crashing and screaming, to their doom at the interface of hell. But they would not carry us. We had escaped. For the time being.

My thoughts went to the Brothers, and to Father Phaedrus and his dying hour. *They* had put me underground. They had been glad to do it. Because of some impossible thing they hoped I would do to the gods-eye, hundreds of miles overhead and now totally invisible. To them, Beatra was almost irrelevant. What, exactly, did they expect of me? They seemed to think that merely getting me underground would automatically result in something cataclysmic. If only they could see me now, wet, shivering, exhausted, without the faintest idea of what to do next. I looked over at my companion. And *you* (I thought) think that *you* feel confused and unreal.

She grunted wearily. "Go ahead. Be cryptic. Who gives a damn."

So she was indifferent. I had a remedy for indifference.

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I started to get up.

"Don't move!" she warned.

I caught the note of sudden danger. "More creatures?"

"Floaters!"

"How many?"

"Two — no, three."

Of course. They were looking for us. Dead or alive.

17. Colonel Aksel

As they came nearer I was able to touch the minds of the men in the floater nearest us. One by one, but quickly, I sorted out the six minds, two to a ship. A colonel was in charge. He was in the front ship, with an aide.

I listened carefuly to the conversation in the lead ship.

"Did the President actually *see* the fellow?" the colonel asked his aide dubiously.

"It was so reported, sir."

"But I understand a floater had crashed into the gate; there was a fire and much confusion. The President might have been mistaken."

"That is true."

"Nevertheless, we have to look."

"Yes, sir."

They were indeed looking for me. Apparently not Virgil; just me. Evidently Virgil had not been visible to the President through the little window in Beatra's ship. I think the colonel had already made up his mind that I did not exist, or that if I ever had, I was now dead. He tossed off a remark to his pilot: "After all, we execute condemned men by dropping them down the Great Shaft. If they are not killed when they hit the water, the dinos get them soon after." And the other replied, "Or, if they escape all that, they go over the falls. There is no way out. These cliffs are completely vertical on both sides, all the way up and down the river."

Now this colonel was an interesting person. He was saying these things. He was restating death and destruction in casual, almost weary cadences, as though these were routine and indifferent things to him. But I was reading him, and I knew that this high officer hated to deal in pain, suffering, and death. He was two people: an officer to the credit of his government — yet, a man subversive to the disciplined requirements of that government. A soldier — and a traitor.

The colonel was now shouting to be heard over the noise. "We have reached the falls. You can turn off the hunt-beams. Tell the others we are breaking off the search. They are to return to base. We will go on to the Vortex Chamber."

"Yes, sir."

Vortex Chamber? Did it have anything to do with my own vortectic powers? More and more interesting!

I crawled out a little and peeked out over the ledge. Upstream, the two following craft had already wheeled around; their lights were fading as they moved slowly back upriver, threading and weaving through the stone pillars. As the remaining craft passed our ledge, all I could see were the four faint headlights, forming broad white cylinders of light by reflecting into the mist and spray thrown up by the falls. Nothing was visible inside the floater. The internal lights were off. In a moment the headlights moved around a

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slight bend in the canyon, beyond the falls, and everything was dark again.

I lay there on my belly for a full five minutes, waiting to make sure they were all really gone, then I got to my feet. Virgil got up silently. I borrowed her eyes and peered upstream. The view was not too good. For one thing, her visuo-reception was limited to infrared, and the trouble with that was, everything here had almost exactly the same chill temperature. It was hard to form a three-dimensional image, or to see anything in perspective. On the other hand, if anything had been moving, it would have stood out in fair relief. However, numerous stalagmites and stalactites cut off considerable portions of the view. So I could not be absolutely sure. I wanted to wait a little longer before forming a light-ball. "Meanwhile," I said to Virgil, "let's walk along the ledge."

"Up or down?"

"Down, I think. We'll follow the ship towards the falls. There seems to be something beyond the falls, something they call the Vortex Chamber."

I had no idea what the Vortex Chamber was. Yet I was becoming more and more certain that it had a direct bearing on my vortectic powers. And certainly, in those powers lay my main hope of saving Beatra. I had a destiny with this place.

"What *is* this Vortex Chamber?" asked Virgil.

I thought of the abbot's map, and the concentric circles. And the center of the circles fixed over some fantastic energy source far underground. But what *kind* of energy source? I did not know. Not yet. So I answered her the best way I knew how — which was no answer at all: "The Chamber's where they keep the Vortex, whatever *that* is."

"You don't make any sense, and I'm hungry."

"Later. Right now, just lend me your eyes, and let's be on our way."

It was easy going for the most part. The ledge was rarely less than three feet wide, and it was always fairly level.

A five minute walk brought us to the edge of the falls.

Virgil shrank back against the cliffside, blinking and squinting to keep the spray out of her eyes. Momentarily I left her eyes and formed a light-ball high over the rim of the falls. We moved on down the ledge another hundred yards so that I could see the crash of the water into the canyon floor far below. The noise, the titanic volume of water, and the incredible drop, all combined to take my breath away. I grew dizzy, and my legs felt weak. With Virgil I shrank back against the cliffside. "Let's get out of here," I said shakily.

She went on ahead. Spurred by the desire to find the Vortex Chamber and also to put as much distance as possible between us and the gut-shattering falls, we made good time. Fortunately the ledge stayed wide and smooth, and there was no trouble.

We had proceeded in this fashion for about ten minutes, when Virgil signaled silently: "We are coming to something."

I stopped instantly and made the light-ball vanish. With the light gone I could of course see nothing, but it might be dangerous to keep it activated. It would announce our presence

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immediately. I listened, but the falls still smothered all sound as it rushed down toward its fatal rendezvous. By now the channel lay at least half a mile below us, and the river fell deeper with every step we took. Within another mile or so it would probably disappear altogether. I probed for signs of life as far as I could with the tendrils of my mind, but there was nothing. "What is it?" I said. "Can you see anything?"

"Not yet."

But I trusted her. There was something there, and not too far downstream. I screened the area mentally again. Again, nothing. "I can't sense anything downstream. What do you think it is?"

She pointed her muzzle downriver and sniffed the air currents carefully. "I think it is a floater, the one that passed us."

"Coming back?" I shrank against the cliffside.

"No, it isn't moving at all."

I relaxed a little. "Perhaps locked into a floater dock?"

"Perhaps. Yes, I think so."

"Then we must be near the Vortex Chamber." She sensed my growing excitement.

"Are you going to take the floater?" (This promised some interesting throat-cutting; she was ready.)

"I don't know yet. First, I would like to explore the minds here to see if they know where Beatra is. Second, I am very curious about this so-called Vortex."

"I think you are forgetting why we are here. Kill the guards. Get the floater, rescue your lady friend, and then let's get the Hades out of here."

It was hardly the time or place to argue that the Vortex of Dis might prove central to our entire rescue operation. For the moment, though, it was no more than a vague intuition on my part. So I simply replied, "Let's move on."

Very slowly and cautiously we rounded a bend in the cliffside.

Virgil stopped. "There it is."

I took her eyes. There is was, indeed. The floater was tied up to a little landing dock, carved out of the cliffside. There seemed to be a door opening on the dock, with a couple of windows in the cliff face. *On the opposite side of the chasm.*

We were on the wrong shore.

Virgil shrank back. My stomach at first sagged, then tightened. I could not see the river, but I could hear it, crashing and racing in the canyon below. So could Virgil. The war-spirit drained from her heart. She said bleakly, "I am not going into the water again."

"Oh, be quiet. Let me think." I reached out across the chasm, searching for the minds of these people. There were six, presently all grouped together. Two — the colonel and his aide — I recognized right away as having been in the search-floater as it passed us at the falls. The other four men seemed to be stationed here on a semipermanent basis. The local staff consisted of a corporal (in charge), a radio man, a technician-maintenance man, and a weapons expert. A floater came in every day or two with food, newspapers, new kine reels, and fresh laundry. The six were presently seated around a table playing cards.

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Nobody was thinking about the Vortex Chamber. They gave me no clue as to where it was or what it was. I had to assume it was nearby. Just as I was wondering what to do next, a bell rang somewhere, and they all looked up. I got the impression they were looking towards the radio room. I immediately switched to the brain of the radio man. "I will get it," he said. I sensed that he got up, walked a short distance, sat down again, and that he had closed a switch and was leaning forward toward a microphone. "Vortex Chamber," he said.

A response in throaty gutturals formed in the auditory circuits of his cerebral cortex. "Central Intelligence calling Vortex."

"Go ahead, Central."

"Has Ship 218 arrived yet?"

"Yes, sir. It came in half an hour ago."

"Let me talk to Colonel Aksel."

"Yes, sir." And now the radio man called out: "Colonel. C.I. calling you, sir."

There was a mumbled complaint from the direction of the table, and then a new voice on the microphone. "Aksel here."

"Any sign of the stranger?"

"Nothing."

"How are things at the Chamber?"

"Nothing unusual here."

"Thank you, Colonel. You might as well bring the ship back."

"Yes." He returned to the table and stood behind his chair. "We have to go back," he announced to the group.

"Just when you are losing," said the radio man.

I sensed that the colonel was taking his jacket from where he had draped it over the back of his chair and was slowly pulling it on.

He must not leave just yet. A plan was forming, but I couldn't sort it all out. I needed a little more time.

"Help me," I signaled quickly to Virgil. "I want you to look for a certain thing. Somewhere, coming out of the side of the building, wherever the radio room is, there ought to be a long metal rod, or perhaps two rods. If there is only one, it will go down the side of the building into the stone work of the dock. That will be the 'ground' for the radio. If there is a second rod, it will be the lead-in for the antenna, and it may reach up to a horizontal wire strung between two poles."

"I see something."

"Wires?"

"A rod. Just one, going into the ground."

"No aerial?"

"I don't see any."

Apparently only the ground waves were effective for radio transmission in these caverns. No matter. The ground wire would suffice. It was located near the side of the quay and actually ran all the way down the cliffside into the roiling water.

As soon as I located it I formed a rapidly rotating ionized air-cylinder around it, on the cliffside, about six feet down from the cliff edge. Even at this distance, it was surprisingly easy. I was about to try something that I had never done before and that even the Brothers would probably not consider possible. I was going to induce an electric current into the radio system of this station, and then I was going to modulate the

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current in a very precise way.

For a moment I became one with the radio system. I was completely and entirely integrated into it.

I was just in time.

Colonel Aksel and his aide were on their way to the entrance port when I made the radio call-bell ring. They stopped. The radio man stepped into the radio alcove and sat down at the microphone. "Vortex Chamber." He moved a switch and waited. Nothing happened. He moved the switch back. "Vortex Chamber. Come in, please." He moved the switch to receive once more. And waited. "Vortex Chamber. Is anyone calling Vortex? Come in, please." He switched back to receive. And nothing.

He was about to get up when I made the bell ring once more.

"Vortex. Who is calling us? Come in, please."

No answer.

By now the colonel had entered the alcove. I switched over to read his mind. "Call Central Intelligence," he said. "Ask them what is going on."

That was fine with me.

"Central Intelligence? Vortex Chamber calling. Yes, sir. No, they have not left yet. Colonel Aksel was on his way out when we began to get these strange call-rings. Twice. But when I answer the call, nobody there. Were you trying to call, or is anything coming through your network?"

My unwitting cohort in Central Intelligence came in clearly. "We have nothing here. You seem to have a receiving malfunction, probably due to proximity to the Chamber. Suggest you check your equipment." The voice was clear and distinct and still had its characteristic guttural overtone. I listened carefully. That voice should be easy to imitate.

The colonel set out once more toward his ship.

I rang the bell again in the radio room.

The colonel hesitated. "Probably another malfunction," he said.

"Sir, you had better wait, just to make sure," said the radio man. He sat down at the bench. "Vortex Chamber. Come in."

"Central Intelligence calling Vortex Chamber." I mimicked that husky voice very well, I thought.

"Come in, Central."

"We have identified your rings."

"Yes?"

"A search party ... actually a guard and a dog. On the ledge across the river from you. He says he has been trying to raise you for the last half hour."

"Half an hour? That's odd. We got our first ring less than three minutes ago."

"Well, perhaps a malfunction in his set. Maybe it got wet, or proximity to the Vortex may have caused difficulties. Be that as it may, ask Colonel Aksel to pick them up."

The colonel was standing behind the radio man. "Tell Central I will pick him up. Also tell Central I should have been informed about this foot-search in the first place."

After some further acerbic interchange, we both signed off.

A moment later the floater swung away from the platform and moved slowly in our direction. A search beam played briefly on us. Although the

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beam did not really bother me, I held one arm over my eyes, mainly because I thought it was expected of me, and waved with the other. Virgil lay at my feet, trying to look like a dog.

The craft drew up level with our ledge, rocking a little, then the side door opened. Virgil and I jumped in. Once inside, I borrowed Virgil's eyes and looked around. The colonel had his aide with him. I studied the colonel quickly. Like all the undergrounders I had seen so far, he had big eyes and a dead-white skin. In addition, he had high cheek bones, a resolute mouth, and an erect military bearing.

He and his aide looked us over with interest. I followed the colonel's thought processes carefully. Several things about me immediately jarred his sensibilities. He had never before seen a man with such small eyes. For another thing, my uniform was wrong. I wore the gray tunic and trousers of a peripheral guard, whereas I was ostensibly on a mission for Central Intelligence and should have been wearing a faded blue outfit. Worse, I was wet, bedraggled, and had neither boots nor weapons. The "dog" particularly alarmed him. The guard dogs to which he was accustomed were considerably smaller, and their eyes much larger, and their canine teeth did not protrude outside their jaws. He was an extremely intelligent man, and it took him only seconds to note these things and consider their implications. But he wasn't done. No, not quite.

He took a step backward. And then he said, very carefully and noncommittally, "Greetings." His hand hovered over the open holster of his electro-beam. His companion looked at us wide-eyed. He, too, sensed that something was wrong.

I held up my right hand in greeting.

The colonel's hand was now resting on the handle of his pistol. When he spoke, his voice was low, metallic, and it was filled with menace. "Where," he asked curtly, "is your radio?"

He had picked the one question that could not be answered. If time had permitted I would have paused to admire his powers of observation.

Virgil signaled to me. "You take the colonel. I will take the other."

I flashed back at her. "Hold on. I don't want them hurt. Not just yet. The colonel is a very unusual fellow. I would like to look into his mind for a little while."

"They are not going to hold still for that."

"Perhaps we can persuade them. Watch it, I'm about to try something."

I had already determined to try a new vortical experiment. If it worked, everything would be fine. If it didn't, things might soon become awkward, for the colonel was in the very act of drawing his pistol.

I willed that a highly ionized ring form about the colonel's neck and then another around the neck of the other guard. Each annulus developed almost instantly, luminous green wheels, spinning and sparkling. The two men did not even have time to be amazed, because the whirling currents set up by the rings threw awry all the neural impulses traveling up and down their spinal columns. They were completely and instantly paralyzed into rigid pillars of flesh, unable even to bat an

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eyelash. If I kept them this way too long, they would die by suffocation. I stepped over and took their pistols. Then I dissolved the paralyzing ion rings. Both men staggered, as though suddenly relieved of a burden, then put their hands to their necks and breathed deeply a couple of times. I waited a moment, then I slipped into the mind of the colonel. "Yes, my friend," I said to him, "I can talk directly to your mind; and, yes, I know what you are thinking, though it helps if you actually express your thoughts in words." I watched him with Virgil's eyes as the staggering suspicion hit him.

Ideas and images flashed through his mind. A man falling. The long drop to the river. Crash! A broken back. Monsters fighting, tearing bloody lumps from the broken body. Flesh fragments escaping, vanishing over the falls. But it hadn't happened. Somehow, none of these disasters had happened. This man, this strange man who had just held him powerless, had lived through it all. "*You* ...!" he declared. *"You are the fugitive!"*

And I replied orally. "I am the man. Now, please do as I say, or I will kill you both. Do you understand me?"

Between the pain of his aching neck muscles and the concept of mind penetration, the colonel required a moment to concentrate before he replied. "I understand what you are saying, but that's all I understand. How are you able to do this to us? What manner of man are you? What is this animal?"

"You don't need to know any of that," I said. "You have a pair of handcuffs in your belt. Tell your aide to lie down on his stomach, put his arms behind his back, and then I want you to cuff his hands." I looked at the aide's boots, then at the colonel's. "And pull off his boots."

The colonel gave the necessary instructions, and presently his companion was immobilized, wide-eyed, mute, and soaked with sweat. The colonel eased the man's boots off, and I pulled them on my own feet. They were not a perfect fit, but better than nothing.

Next I handcuffed the colonel to his own steering column. He too was perspiring heavily, but was otherwise calm. I looked into his mind. It was about as I suspected. The bodies of the eight guardsmen had been found. The man who had attempted to get on the President's ship was a prime suspect. He was, however, now assumed to be dead. Only the colonel and the aide knew the truth.

While I studied the colonel I considered a curious fact: my powers of vortex formation were stronger in this area than I had ever before experienced. The abbot's map again. I was very close to the strange source of my vortical powers.

I asked the colonel, "What is in your Vortex Chamber?"

There was something almost laughable about the way the curtains began to drop all over the images in his mind.

"You have never been inside the Chamber?" I asked.

"That is correct."

"But you have heard many rumors?"

"The subject is forbidden. I cannot talk about it."

"In a very literal sense, Colonel, you

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are *not* talking about it."

"I am giving you information. And *that* is forbidden."

I smiled. "Colonel, the regulations are hereby suspended. Now, let us return to the inquiry. Your mind reveals rumors of a vortex in the form of a great spinning sphere. How big is it?"

"I don't know." He probably spoke the truth. But, on the other hand, he formed a picture in his mind of a great vaulted room, and in the center was a glowing sphere, perhaps three hundred feet in diameter, hovering a few feet off the floor.

"What is it made of?"

"Great metal disks, all parallel to each other."

"What makes it spin?"

"It sits over a power source buried in the earth itself."

"What kind of power source?"

"I don't know."

"Is there an entrance to the Chamber?"

"There is a door. No one is permitted in or out."

But now the images were fluttering again, a combination of rumors, speculation, and fantasy. The door had opened a few years back. A fellow officer had told it to the colonel. A body had been taken out of the Chamber. A man had walked in. The door had closed again, but while it had been open, the entire interior of the great chamber had been visible; the spinning vortex had been seen, and sitting around it, three or four men. Words formed in the colonel's mind: "Keepers of the Vortex."

It was all hearsay. Nothing direct. But it was fascinating. It was a fair assumption that my telekinetic powers were so strong here because they were generated by the great-grandfather of all vortices, emanating its magic radiation in all directions, and through a mile of rock, even to the surface of the earth, to the minds of the Brothers, who of course had no idea of the nature of the wellspring of their remarkable powers. But enough of that for now.

"Where is Central Intelligence located?" I asked.

Again the flurry of images. But this time the colonel was not speculating. He knew from personal experience. Central Intelligence was two levels above us. It was a collection of prisons, administrative buildings, and police, guard, and investigational offices.

"Why so much repressive activity?" I asked.

"It is the only way to control the revolutionary movement." There was a sardonic, mocking touch to his answer.

"But why would anyone want to revolt?" I asked. "It seems very peaceful here."

"You seem unaware of our basic premise. It is our destiny to leave Dis and resume the government of the United States."

At first, I thought I must have misunderstood certain of the images. "Try that one again."

"Our people will leave Dis. All of us, nearly ten thousand, men, women, and children, will go forth into the land of the sun. And we will resume control of the country."

Well, there it was.

"Have you consulted the existing local surface governments about this?"

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The colonel studied me carefully. I knew he was hiding something. I dipped into his mind, looked for it. But it eluded me. All I could get was something about "Demo revolutionaries," "minority leader," "doomsday capsule." It probably involved a local political plot, and I didn't want to puzzle over it.

He said, "It was all arranged in the beginning. Dis — meaning the District of Columbia — was created long before the Desolation, to house the officials of the federal government and their families, as a place of refuge from nuclear war. The war came, and the Desolation with it. After the radiation waned, we were to emerge once more ..."

"... and take over."

"Of course."

"All of that vanished into history, three thousand years ago."

He shrugged. "It has taken that long for the radiation to dissipate."

These ghostly caverns were peopled by lunatics!

I tried another approach. "Why did the President kidnap the woman?"

"He was leading a survey party. They enountered you and the woman by sheer accident. They intended to kill you, and they thought they had. They captured the woman for two reasons. Firstly, so that she could not report to the surface authorities that they had been there. Secondly, because it has been our practice for several hundred years to abduct selected representatives of the surface culture in order to follow your progress. We bring them here for purposes of interrogation."

"What happens to them after the interrogation?"

"You mean, when we have extracted all pertinent information from them?"

"Yes, what then?"

"We dispose of them."

I dug with savage anguish into his innermost thought recesses. "The woman Beatra ... what will happen to her at Central Intelligence?"

I saw the sequence. He did not even have to form the images. She had already been subject to prolonged routine interrogation in the security rooms of the White House. The second and final phase would now go forward at Central Intelligence: hypnosis, drugs, and torture.

"They nearly always die," said the colonel. He shrugged his shoulders. He knew, and he knew that I knew.

"How long do they last at Central Intelligence?"

"It depends. A strong man might last a week. A woman, two or three days. Some, less."

My first impulse was to force him to pilot us immediately to that horrid place.

But I no longer had the advantage of surprise. Even though they thought I was dead, the President's person had been threatened, and the patrols on the street and in the guard posts were probably doubled and quadrupled. And worst of all, the entire complex that constituted Central Intelligence was doubtless buzzing with guards like hornets around a broken hive.

The colonel sensed my appreciation of my predicament. He directed a thought at me. "Give yourself up. I will recommend leniency."

I smiled at him. "Leniency? For a

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man eight times a murderer? Not likely, colonel. I am inclined to think that you are an honorable man. But I don't know about your peers. Men charged with the duties of high government office make and break promises as their politics seem to require at the moment. And, yet, the concept has possibilities, in several variations. For example, if I gave myself up, knowing they would kill me, could I make it conditional on their first releasing the lady Beatra, alive and well?"

"Who knows? You would have to ask them."

"You don't really think so, do you?"

We had both thought about that possibility. And we had both come to the same conclusion: the simple act of making the proposition would announce my presence here. After that, all exits would be closed to me. They would eventually find me and kill me. *And* Beatra.

I studied my prisoners.

"As a hostage I have no value," said the colonel.

"I know," I said. He and his aide couldn't be exchanged for either Beatra or for me.

He said, "The woman ... is she your wife?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

"Do you have a wife, Colonel?"

"Yes."

He caught the parallel at once. He too was likely to die, and well before I did. It was just plain silly to tell him, "I am sorry."

"Colonel," I said, "to get to Central Intelligence, we could take this ship back up the canyon to the great shaft. Then we could ascend the shaft until we reached the second level. And then we could proceed down the street to Central Intelligence. And there, somewhere, I will find my wife. Is that essentially correct?"

"Except that you would never reach your wife."

"Central is two levels overhead?"

"Yes."

"I suggest to you, Colonel, that there is a more direct route. I suggest that there is a stairwell connecting the inner sanctum of Central with the Vortex Chamber."

"I never heard of it. No, I don't think so."

"Think, colonel."

In my own mind, logic required it. I persisted. "Think back. What are your traditions? Wasn't the Chamber built before Central Intelligence was organized?"

"Yes," he said, "I believe the Chamber was built first."

"And Central Intelligence was later?"

"Very likely." He was curious now himself. "What are you driving at?"

I hurried on. "The first building built at Central Intelligence. Think hard. I suggest that it was not a prison. I suggest that it was simply a guard house?"

"A guard house? To guard what?"

I did not tell him. Perhaps I had told him too much already. I gave the answer to myself. To guard the shaft that went down to the Vortex Chamber. There had to be a shaft, and a big one, because freight-carrying floaters had to have ready access to the Chamber. This

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was the only way to get the great metal plate sections into it. After the Vortex was completed, the shaft was probably closed to traffic, and then, over the years, the original function of the guard house was forgotten. It became just another building in the spreading cluster of buildings that became Central Intelligence.

It was just as well the colonel did not fully realize what I was going to propose.

I took from the colonel's brain the directions for finding the door to the Vortex Chamber. It was quite simple. Proceed to the end of the main corridor here in the guard house, and there it would be.

It was time to get moving. The radio would have to be knocked out. I formed a heat-ball and struck the ground wire, which promptly melted with a green flash. Then I set the floater in motion, and we slowly recrossed the canyon to the guard house dock. I touched the minds inside, one after another. They were all still playing cards in the game room. They did not know we had returned.

The thought formed in the colonel's mind, "What are you going to do?"

"With you, you mean? I have not yet decided. First, I'd like a few more facts about the river. How far downstream does it go?"

"Couple of miles. Then the canyon pinches off, and the river drops out of sight."

"Where does it go when it drops out of sight?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?"

"Ever heard of the Spume?"

"The ... *what*?"

"The Spume. A vast column of steam blasting from a hole in the earth. It would be perhaps ten or fifteen miles from here."

"No. I have never heard of the Spume."

It all fitted together. In ancient times the Tomack River flowed a long way to reach a great city, some say Washton, and then it flowed on past this city, and emptied into a great bay. The Desolation changed all this. The great city disappeared. The sea arm of the great bay disappeared. And the Tomack went underground. I was the only one in the world who knew its final fate. "Our Tomack River," I said, "goes underground and becomes your Lethe. And when your Lethe has its fatal meeting with molten rock, far below, it all changes to steam and comes to the surface again."

"As your Spume."

"Exactly." I thought of the Returner. He had ridden down this Lethal water, had been hurled down, down, down, in that crazed drop. And then the explosion of cold torrent on molten mother rock, and then the devastating journey upward again, tossed like a pebble in the superheated steam column. How had he survived, even long enough to tell his tale to the monks? He was fantastic. I wished that I had been able to know him.

The colonel had turned pale. He had caught some of the images: a floater in the river, then down the great crevasse toward the earth's center, then in the Spume column. "Is *that* the way you are going to kill us?" he whispered.

I smiled. "Colonel, you are a strong

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man, and a brave and resourceful one. You might even survive such a trip. But, no." Here, I went mental again. "A man who harbors such treacherous thoughts concerning his own government cannot be completely my enemy." I thought very briefly about enlisting his aid in my search for Beatra, but I decided against it. The risks were too great. In this particular matter he might choose his government over me. Yet, the thought kept coming back to me, a persistent, throbbing warning: don't kill him. So, rightly or wrongly, I made the choice. These two would live.

18. The Vortex Chamber

We returned and entered the post. No alarm rang. Nothing happened. I was already in the main corridor, and with Virgil's eyes I could see the door at the end. The gateway to Beatra.

The game room was midway down the hallway, and I could see that the door was partly open. I considered our chances of sneaking past the game room and reaching the Vortex Chamber portal unnoticed. It was certainly worth a try. We moved silently up the hall. I kept a mental net thrown over the minds of the players, alert for any sign that any of them was watching the door.

We had just tiptoed past when the man on the far side of the table looked up. He was not really looking at the door, and I thought for a moment that the tiny flash of movement would not really register on his conscious mind. A foot past the doorway, we waited, while I focused back on him.

The thought formed in his brain: "Did I see something?" He stood up from the table and pushed his chair back. And now the others were looking at him inquiringly. He pulled the pistol from his holster and started toward the door. "I think I saw something," he said, "in the hall."

One of the group laughed. "Translation: you are winning and want to quit the game."

Now he was walking toward the door.

I signaled to Virgil: "Close your eyes." I did likewise, and then in swift sequence I threw my arm over my eyes, formed a very large and very bright light-ball, kicked the game room door fully open, and moved the light-ball into the room.

Immediately afterward, the guard's pistol dropped to the floor, and there were howls of anguish as the men attempted to cover their faces. Virgil and I left them groping for the doorway and calling out to one another, and we proceeded to the end of the corridor.

Here I noted quickly that there was no handle on the door. Just as the colonel had said, it could be opened only from the inside. This was good, in that it could probably be opened by the simple turn of a knob or handle on the inside door panel. This was bad in that I would have to take time to locate the mechanism. Obviously, it should be at a conventional height and at the side of the door. And, obviously, the mechanism had either a bar handle or a conventional turning knob. However, I wondered if I had the skill to form and maneuver an air vortex on the other side of a heavy metal door, completely out of sight.

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I would soon know.

I gathered all the force of will at my command and brought an air-sphere into existence on the other side of the door. I held the palm of my hand against the door, and pressed my ear against it, just above my hand. I made the air-ball bounce a couple of times against the door on the other side, just to make sure it was there. Next, I moved it to where I thought the door-knob should be, if there were one there at all. Again, I felt that the air ball had encountered something. A knob? I would soon know. I tried to center the whirling sphere around the knob. And then I tightened the grip of the ball about the knob, and let it turn.

There was a gratifying "click" in the latch mechanism. I put my shoulder to the big bronze slab and pushed. It moved slowly, silently, inward.

We were just in time. A guard, less injured or more dedicated than the rest, was groping his way down the corridor toward us. He could not see us, but his pistol was drawn, and he just might try to fire if he heard a strange sound or touched a strange body.

We stopped inside and closed the door behind us. The latch caught firmly. And the door jumped slightly from the guardsman's following shot. It was of no consequence. For the moment, we seemed to be safe.

We found ourselves on a high circular balcony that bounded the upper area of an immense spherical room. A long spiral staircase led down to the chamber below. There, a great radiant sphere hummed a few feet above the floor and cast a soft luminosity throughout the entire space. It seemed to be motionless, but I knew that it was in fact spinning, for this had to be the Vortex.

It spun on an axis slightly tilted, and it occurred to me that the axis angle was very like that of the earth with respect to the sun, which is to say, about 23 degrees. I was puzzled for a moment because the sound of the great spinning was not louder. And then I noticed that the entire sphere was encased in an outer transparent shell, evidently there to permit operation under a high vacuum so as to minimize air resistance to the blades. There must have been a hollow tube running through the shell axis, because a thin, barely visible beam of red light shone up through the center of the sphere and struck a strange optical system, whence it radiated in three directions, each perpendicular to the other. Each reflected beam was picked up by its own optical receiver in three widely separated areas of the chamber. Despite its many puzzling aspects (what made it spin? what great energy source made it hover six feet above the floor?), I felt a sudden rapport with this great machine.

As I watched, I noted the figures of two men, seated at control panels near the globe. I surmised at once that there was another man out of sight on the other side, and that they were all spaced equidistant from each other. The Keepers of the Vortex. They all wore dark glasses against the glow of the sphere.

Just then, another man emerged from an alcove under the opposite run of the balcony. He stretched briefly,

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yawned, rubbed his eyes, put on his dark glasses, and then he walked over to one of the Keepers. The latter spoke to him in a low voice and pointed to certain dials on the panel. The newcomer pulled a length of paper tape from a drop-pocket in the panel face, and they looked at it together. Finally, the first man yielded his chair to his relief, walked away, and disappeared into an alcove under the balcony.

I understood at once that these men had dedicated their lives to the Vortex. Only death could release them from this room. What great service were they performing for their fellow men that could persuade them to make such a sacrifice?

It was all very mysterious and intriguing. I wanted to probe their minds and find out what the Vortex was all about, but time was running out for Beatra, and I had to press on.

I had noted another door on the opposite side, which might well be the exit we sought. Virgil and I started on around the balcony — and then Virgil whined.

"What is it?" I flashed to her.

"Don't you feel it? The balcony is trembling."

"I don't feel a thing."

"That is because your senses are dull. Look at the Keepers. *They* know it."

And they did indeed seem to think something was going on. The two seated men, including the new one, had got to their feet and were bending over the control panels. They were watching something intently. The man who had yielded up his seat hurried from his alcove and stood with his companion.

And then I *did* feel something. The balcony vibrated under my feet.

The light shaft of the Vortex sphere flickered, and it seemed to me that the great ball wobbled very slightly on its axis. Instantly, the men at the control panels began to punch buttons and turn knobs, from time to time looking up at their great spinning creature.

It was a temblor, of course. Rather a mild one, but it seemed to have a startling effect on the Vortex and on the men.

I couldn't figure it out. Obviously, the temblors upset the rotation of the Vortex in some way, and the function of the Keepers was to put it back in perfect "spin." But what the Vortex was doing there in the first place, or why it was important to minimize irregularities in its rotation quite escaped me.

We were probably safe for the moment. Eventually, of course, one of the guardsmen outside would grope his way out on the dock, and there he would find the colonel. And the colonel would come back inside, would not find any trace of man or animal, and would surmise that we had escaped somehow via the Vortex Chamber. And then what would he do? Would he try to get word into the Keepers? Quite likely. Indeed, that was about all he could do. And then they would tell him they had not seen me, that they had never opened the door, and that would be that. Everyone would be very baffled and upset.

Nevertheless, we couldn't linger. I put my head down, and Virgil and I crept on around the balcony. We had traversed about half the circuit when I

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noticed that everything had stabilized again below. The red light beams, barely visible, were now as steady as if they had been ruled in red ink on the drafting board. Two of the Keepers were talking casually to each other. Another was walking across the room, toward what and for what purpose, I could not guess. The fourth was in the act of throwing a piece of paper tape into a waste basket.

At any moment one of them might look up, perhaps to check the three overhead light beams, or to stretch his neck, or for no reason at all. This would offer problems. I knew that these men had to be left here unharmed, so that they could keep the Vortex in good running order, thereby preserving, at least for the time being, my own vortectic powers. Also, I knew (and this, on an instinctive level) that to destroy these men might bring great harm to Beatra. So I could not blind them, even temporarily. Yet they must not be permitted to see me, or know that I had been within the Chamber.

I would have to occupy them once more with their reason-for-existence — their Vortex. It should not be too difficult. The balcony had not been swept in weeks. I formed a spinning sphere of air along the floor of the balcony corridor, where it picked up a fair amount of fine dust. I sent the globe right into the path of one of the three ceiling light beams. The beam flickered and wavered. And now the Keepers were calling out to one another and rushing to their positions at the console. While they were glued anxiously to their places by this false alarm, Virgil and I crept on around the balcony. At the end of the balcony runway I dissolved the dust ball.

The balcony exit door opened from the inside. We quickly closed it behind us and found ourselves on some sort of stone landing. Here, the darkness was total, and I used Virgil's eyes. Even her remarkable vision wasn't too good here, because the uniformity of temperature gave little or no sense of objects, perspective, or three-dimensional impressions.

She listened and sniffed the dank, musty air carefully. "Nobody is anywhere near us," she said. "In fact, I don't think anyone has been in here for a thousand years."

"How much can you see?"

"It looks as though we are near the bottom of a big shaft. We're on a spiral staircase that goes down and up."

I took her eyes and studied the bottom. The lower level of the shaft seemed covered by a haphazard layer of broken stones, rotting timbers, corroded metal rods, and other assorted debris. I looked up, and with her eyes followed the circular path of the staircase, up and up and around and around, until it finally faded into blackness.

"Do you think there might be a guard post up there somewhere?" I asked her.

"I can't sense anything."

"Let's go on."

And so we proceeded slowly and silently up the winding stairway. From time to time we brushed against clusters of calcite crystals growing out of the walls. There were no echoes. Even the slight sounds of our footsteps were instantly swallowed up in the total

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gloom. After a time, Virgil signaled. "I can sense that we are coming to the top. Yes, I can see the top of the shaft. It's closed over. There's nobody there."

"Any side corridors where somebody might be waiting for us?"

"I don't see anything."

I made a tiny light-ball overhead and moved it slowly up the central axis of the shaft. The soft light reflected back from the damp featureless surfaces.

It was exactly as I had surmised from my discussions with the colonel. The undergrounders had dug this great access shaft here many centuries ago to lower the great sphere plates into the Vortex Chamber. There was no other way to move the heavy equipment into the Chamber. Its duty done, the builders had sealed off the shaft, placed a guard house at the upper level, and then their descendants had forgotten that the great hole ever existed.

"Come on," I said. I took the remaining steps two at a time, with Virgil not far behind. There was a railed-in landing at the top of the stairway, and inside the landing, flush with the wall, was an exit door with an iron handle. With the light above and behind me, I seized the handle and tested it slowly and with growing strength and pressure. It would not turn in any direction. I brought the light-ball closer and bent over to examine the handle. Of course it would not turn. It had not been used in several centuries. The lock mechanism had had plenty of time to rust and corrode. Lock, latch, and handle were undoubtedly a mass of thoroughly integrated metal oxides.

I struck the door panel smartly with my open palm. The shaft echoed with a series of hollow slaps that finally faded away.

"The door is some kind of pressed wood-plastic material," I said.

"Will it burn?"

"I don't know."

I could cut the lock out with a heat-ball as a cutting torch. Technically, it ought to work. The question was — what was on the other side? Would guards be waiting for us there?

"Can you hear or sense anything on the other side?" I asked Virgil.

She stood within inches of the door, ears pricked, cocking her head from one side to the other. "I don't think there's anything there."

I formed a heat-ball and began to move it slowly in an arc about the door handle. Clouds of acrid smoke spewed out from the heated area. Virgil sneezed and backed away.

When the arc had been completed, I extinguished the heat-ball and stepped back. I had expected to see an arc cut entirely through the door area around the handle. I saw only a semicircle of carbonaceous crust. The door must be made of some indestructible material! Small wonder it had endured all these centuries!

I restudied the situation.

"It didn't work," said Virgil impatiently.

"It did seem to char, at least on the surface. There may be a fire retardant in the material. If I had pure oxygen, I'll bet I could make it burn." I didn't have pure oxygen, but perhaps I could find some.

Keeping the light-ball above and

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behind me, I formed a simple vortex of whirling air about two feet in diameter. This I made to spin faster and faster, until I could begin to sense a stratification of the molecules within the sphere. The heavier oxygen molecules were becoming concentrated in the outer shell of the sphere. The lighter nitrogen molecules were collecting in the center. Holding this air centrifuge steady, I formed the heat-ball again and struck it into the door area above the handle. When I judged that it had got the immediate area of the door handle red-hot, I began to move the heat-ball slowly down in an arc as before. This time, however, I followed it with the oxygen ball. And now the results were greatly different. This time there was no smoke. The combustion was absolutely complete. At the end of the arc I collapsed the heat-ball, oxygen-ball, and light-ball. The handle sagged. I touched it ... it burned my fingers. I placed my tunic on the landing stones, pulled off a boot, and gave the handle a healthy blow with the heel. It tumbled out on my tunic with a muffled clatter.

We both listened, while I pulled boot and tunic on again.

Virgil sniffed. "There is a current of fresh air coming through the hole in the door."

I felt it, too.

I bent down and peeked through the hole. It seemed completely dark on the other side. "Take a look," I said to Virgil.

She jumped up and leaned against the door with her forepaws. "It's a corridor of some sort. Nobody in it."

"Any side alleys?"

"Can't really say. A few yards down, there seems to be a door."

"What scents?"

"Traces of people ... months old ..."

"In the vicinity of this door?"

"No. Nothing this close."

I explored the hallway in search of mental activity. I found no minds at all. It looked as though we could get out without being seen. I put my shoulder to the door and pushed. It did not move. The hinges were locked with rust. I pushed again. I could feel them begin to crack and give way amid screeching and groaning. I stopped for a moment, fearful that the noise would bring soldiers on the run. But nothing happened. There was no sign of life on the other side. I resumed pushing until I had just enough room to squeeze through.

We hurried up the corridor until we came to the side entrance. Here we paused and listened. "Nothing on the other side," said Virgil.

Should we go on, or should we take this side door?

I tested the handle. It was locked, of course. But the knob latch was simple, and I merely formed an air-ball on the other side, twisted the knob as I had done on entry into the Vortex Chamber, and opened the door.

19. The Banquet

The door opened into what seemed to be a storeroom of some sort.

Virgil sniffed. "People have been here recently. Lots of people. And, what's more, there's food here. And I'm hungry."

I studied the place with Virgil's eyes. "Seems to be a cupboard of some

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sort," I agreed. "Bags of flour. Canned goods. Jars. Boxes. And over there is a cold room. The kitchens are probably next door."

Virgil was so interested in the proposition of finally getting a meal that she failed to hear what I heard: the sound of a door opening somewhere. "Down!" I signaled. We ducked behind a stack of wooden crates.

A dim light came on somewhere.

A voice called out. "And don't forget the hank of smoked fish!"

"I got more than I can carry already," complained a youthful voice.

"And hurry up. You'll have to go up to the cabinet room and clear off the dishes and serve dessert and coffee. Take a cart."

"How far along are they?"

"Don't worry about how far along. Just get up there. You know the President can't be kept waiting."

A boy was going to come in here, get a cart, and go to a place called "the cabinet room," and the President would be there. The President. *Him.* Instantly, I knew what to do.

Just overhead I noted a row of big fish steaks hanging from ceiling hooks. Everything I needed was either in front of my face or being brought to me. The fates were being kind indeed. (Or were they just leading me merrily on?) Virgil could not take her eyes off the fish. She drooled and licked her chops, but I refused to accept any messages from her.

That kitchen boy had better be about my size.

He was.

As he came around the crates, I struck him with my fist in the base of the skull, and he collapsed. I dropped my guardsman uniform to the floor and stripped the boy's white overalls from his limp body and drew them on. He had a peculiar white hat with drooping earpieces. I pulled it on. It was a poor fit, but it made my face harder to see.

I pulled down one smoked fish for Virgil and another for the cook. "If the boy moves, just growl at him. If the cook comes in, rip his throat out. Stay here until you hear from me."

As she gulped down the fish, she managed one sarcastic comment. "And just where would I be going?"

I found a cart on the far side. Fortunately there was enough light without her eyes. I hoped the kitchen area would be similarly lit. If it wasn't, I was in trouble.

I needed directions on how to reach the dining hall, and I got them easily from the mind of the cook. A service elevator outside the kitchen would lead to a serving room on the floor above. But first I had to get through the kitchen — and past whoever was in it. I pushed the cart through the swinging doors and across the steaming room, toward the elevator. I kept my head down, but I was looking covertly to both sides. The only person I had to pass was the cook. He was turned away from me and was leaning over one of the utensil counters. I tossed the fish onto the counter at his right hand as I passed. He grunted but did not look up. And thereby he saved his life.

As I stood momentarily before the elevator door, looking for the call button, it opened automatically. It was empty, and I pushed the cart inside, turned, and looked for the button panel

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that ought to be on the inside. I couldn't see anything, and while I was looking, the door began to slide shut.

I watched that rectangle of vague light grow slimmer and slimmer, and I still had not found the button panel. Did these things operate on a different principle from those I had used in New Bollamer? Frantically I scanned each of the four walls — and even the floor and ceiling. But there was nothing. The door was now shut, and I stood there in total darkness, trying to hold down my rising panic. My palms left streaks of sweat as I passed them hurriedly over the eye-level portions of the walls, searching for something — anything — that might control the flight of this dark prison.

It began to move. Was it going up, or down? And where would it stop? I tasted despair. I should have gotten the whole story from the cook before boarding this crazy cage.

As I stood there, helpless — it stopped. Then, slowly, the door cranked open. Even before the door was fully open, I had cast my mental net out ahead of me. I encountered only one mind. The chief busboy ... actually a middle-aged man. He was waiting impatiently for me outside in the elevator alcove, and he was angry.

I was exactly where I should be! The explanation was simple. The elevator ran only between these two floors, and automatically.

When I came off the elevator, the busboy looked at me in surprise. "What happened to Joyo?" he demanded. And he added mentally, "And what kind of odd-eyed creature are *you*?"

I had already read the concepts as they formed in his mind. He was stupid, but I was afraid to risk replying orally. I held up my hands helplessly.

(Behind me, I took note that the elevator door had closed and that the elevator was on its way back to the floor below. That was reassuring. It would make it easy for Virgil to rejoin me when the time came.)

"Can't you talk?" grumbled the chief busboy. "Oh, never mind." (The kind of help they give me nowadays! Cook and I will have to settle this once and for all.) "Just get in there and clear off the table. Do you think you can do that without spilling anything on the guests?"

I held up an index finger as a promise of exemplary performance.

He continued his preparations with what appeared to be some sort of dessert and a couple of carafes full of a brown liquid. "When you finish clearing the table, you can serve cake and coffee. And now I have to get back down to the kitchen."

And so he left. While he had had been haranguing me, I had been mind-searching the occupants of the other room.

There were ten people there, and it was indeed a high-level conference.

They were all dressed very strangely, in clothes like those on the mannequins in the New Bollamer Pre-Desolation Museum. Which is to say, they wore black trousers, white shirts, black vests, and black jackets. Where the collar fastened in front was a funny little thing that looked like a black butterfly.

There were odd devices hung on the walls. The one on the wall behind the

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President was a great golden circular plaque, and on the plaque was a bird of a kind I have never seen. It had a great hawklike bill and its wings were outspread. Surrounding the bird was a circle of stars, and on the outside a circle of words, which I had to crane my neck to read: "Seal of the President of the United States." On the opposite wall was a rectangular piece of cloth, a pretty thing, with red and white alternating stripes. In one of the upper corners was a crowded collection of five-pointed stars. On a third wall was some sort of map. It showed a generally rectangular looking area, cut up by dotted lines. I have seen maps before, but this one told me nothing. And, finally, on the fourth wall were two big scrolls, side by side. One said, "In God We Trust." (Which, of course, was reasonable, and hardly admits of argument or disagreement.) The other was illegible, or perhaps in some strange language. It said "E pluribus unum." Now what could that mean? It was all very strange.

There was a lively discussion going on. I caught several words and concepts repeated over the over again. "Doomsday capsule." The colonel's mind had held the same concept, and here it was again. "Emigration." That must mean the great exodus to the surface that the colonel had mentioned. "Quake." That was a new one. Some things I thought I understood. Some, I knew I didn't. And although I hadn't yet picked up a thorough background of the discussion, I had confirmed one very important fact. My mortal enemy, the President, was here, and he was having a cabinet meeting.

Very respectfully I walked over to his side and took his dinner plate, his salad dish, his bread dish, and all of his silverware except his cake fork and his coffee spoon, while I studied him and probed his mind.

I judged him to be in his late thirties. He had blond, well-trimmed hair. The flesh of his cheeks looked soft and pale. He laid his fork on his plate with long elegant fingers and leaned forward confidently in his high-backed chair in a position of great poise and personal presence.

"Let me sum up the White House position," he said.

I couldn't make out all the words, but I followed the concepts easily. I put his dishes on the cart and moved to the man next to him.

"We must leave our home here," continued the President. "The temblors are increasing in magnitude and frequency. The Keepers tell me the Vortex has very nearly reached its limit. For nearly three thousand years it has been faithfully absorbing the energy of the temblors and re-radiating it harmlessly through the ceiling rocks. We owe our lives to the Vortex. But it has now reached the limits of its capacity."

Now it all began to hang together: the fish tank in the first guard room that I had encountered. And the mobile hanging in the guard room. They were crude but effective means for detecting earth tremors. These people lived in hourly dread of movements of the surrounding strata.

He continued: "We have four hundred floaters, loaded, waiting to go up through the grotto route. They line the streets and corridors there. Our

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storage warehouses are full and overflowing. We are here now for the purpose of setting the hour of the great emigration."

A man on the other side of the table cleared his throat. He was about to speak. I caught his thoughts. He was the Secretary of War. From the corner of my eye I stole a glance at him. He seemed to be very young for a position of such responsibility. He was barely into his twenties. I looked furtively around the table. The ages were scattered. Some young, some middle-aged, some very old. This was not a homogeneous group of advisers. What did this youth know about war? What qualified each of them to be here?

And then I remembered. These offices were hereditary. The President was President because his father had been President. And here was the son of the recently deceased Secretary of War. I had a sudden crystalline insight into this so-called government. It was government by an aristocracy whose main purpose was to preserve itself. I could assume that it would tolerate discussion, but not dissent.

"Mr. President?" said the Secretary of War.

"Mr. Secretary."

"The army would like six weeks' notice. Can the Vortex last that long?"

"I understand that it can, but let's ask the expert." The President leaned toward the man seated on his right. "Mr. Secretary of the Interior, can you confirm this?"

"We can give you two months with a fair degree of confidence. After that, it becomes very chancy. But why would you need six weeks' notice?"

"It's the doomsday capsule," said the Secretary of War. "The hemolytic material is wind-borne. After release into the upper atmosphere, it needs a good two weeks for certain circulation over all the earth, two more to ensure total kill, and another two for the residue to decompose by oxygen, sunlight, and water vapor in the atmosphere. Total, six weeks."

"I don't think we need to kill all life on the surface," observed the Secretary of State. "Just enough to make sure our emergence will be unopposed. We really ought to preserve some sort of labor force up there. My guess is that if we kill half of them, or perhaps even less, we won't have any trouble with the survivors."

The President shrugged. "There is no way to reduce the dosage. If it works at all, everything dies. All over the world."

I had stopped, stunned, and I think my mouth had dropped open. The doomsday capsule ... must be the same as the gods-eye. And it carried a poison capable of killing everything on the surface of the earth. The Brothers were right. This was why they had put me here!

I noted suddenly that the Secretary of War was staring at me thoughtfully. A vague disquiet was forming in his mind. He was thinking: "There is something peculiar about this servant boy. He looks very strange. I have never seen him here before. Should I say anything to the President? But if I did, and my fears turned out to be completely groundless, that would make me look like a fool. Perhaps he looks strange because he is a throwback to

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our sun-devil ancestors. One still crops up, now and then, after thirty centuries. We put them at menial tasks. That's probably what he is, a throwback."

I closed my mouth and quickly resumed my rounds.

The Secretary of the Treasury spoke up. "I have no confidence in the army's doomsday capsule, anyway. I don't think we should depend on it so totally. How do we know it's going to work at all?"

Across from him, the Director of Science and Technology answered. "We won't know for sure, of course, until we try it. Yet scientifically we can see no possibility for failure."

"But," demurred the Secretary of the Treasury, "the War Department put that rocket into orbit over three thousand years ago. Can the poison still be effective after all that time? Suppose we release the canister from the rocket, and suppose it doesn't work. And suppose we emigrate on schedule. The sun-devils would slaughter us."

"Theoretically, time ought not to affect the poison," replied the Science Director.

"Gentlemen ...." The President was speaking.

I was now far enough down the table where I could look back and see the President. He smiled. "Perhaps we can satisfy ourselves on that point, here and now. Our ancestral government made only about one gram of the poison. And nearly all of that one gram is presently in the canister on the orbiting capsule."

"You said, 'nearly all,'" said the Secretary of Commerce. "You mean we still have some left down here?" He sounded nervous, I thought.

"Yes," said the President. "There are exactly three molecules underground. And I have two of them with me tonight." He pulled a tiny vial from his jacket. The light was (for me) poor, and that was all I could make out without stopping to stare — which would have been perilous indeed. I moved my cart along.

The room was instantly silent. I caught waves of fear from several of the banqueters. "Nothing to be concerned about," said the President. He pushed his chair back, got up, and walked over to the side of the room. I noticed there for the first time a small aquarium. "Gentlemen, I think all of us keep pet fishes. Well, here we have a tank with three fishes. Catfish, I believe. They have not been fed today, and they are hungry. There are two gelatin fish-food capsules in this vial. Let's see what will happen." He pulled a pair of pliers from his pocket, grasped the little container gently in the plier jaws, thrust the vial under the water, crushed the glass, and then let pliers, glass, and all fall to the bottom of the tank.

The little fish swam to and fro in a great fright for a few seconds. Then they calmed down, noted the two capsules floating on the surface, and made a run for them. Two of the little creatures got their supper. The third didn't. Immediately, the first diner began to struggle and to convulse. It frothed the water with its contortions. Then the second one. In a moment they both turned belly up and floated to the surface. But nothing at all happened to the third. It retreated to a corner of the aquarium and remained there, hungry

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but alive, flat on the bottom of the sand layer, its tiny antennae quivering delicately over its head.

"That may give you a rough idea," said the President. "One molecule per capsule. And as you saw, one molecule was quite sufficient. It enters the blood stream by being absorbed through the stomach. It immediately begins to catalyze the destruction of hemoglobin. The resulting fragments of the blood cells then traitorously work on the decomposition of their neighboring sister cells. The effect builds up, and it is all over in seconds. The blood can no longer carry oxygen, and the creature simply suffocates."

"I thought you said something about three molecules," said the Vice-President. "Apparently one fish escaped."

"Yes," said the President, "one fish escaped. But only temporarily, I think." He smiled. It was a cruel smile. I knew what he was thinking and exactly how he wanted to use the third molecule, which apparently he kept in a vial in his safe. He was saving it for a member of this very cabinet, absent tonight, a traitorous revolutionary, a man he identified in his own mind as the Minority Leader, presently on military duty.

Of course! The colonel!

The revolutionaries were against activating the circling capsule. Colonel Aksel was their leader, and I gathered that very recently he had been unmasked by Central Intelligence.

I felt weak. He was the only possible ally I had in this dim place, and I had handcuffed him to the steering wheel of his floater. Well, it was unfortunate, but regrets were futile. I returned to the problem at hand.

"How many molecules are in the doomsday capsule," demanded the Secretary of the Interior.

"About ten to the twentieth power," said the Chief of Chemical Warfare. "Enough to wipe out the entire population of land-running chordata in the upper world, one hundred times over."

"Land creatures only?" said the Secretary of Commerce. "How about the fish? We've just seen it kill two fish ...?"

The Secretary of War smiled. "It hydrolyzes — decomposes — almost instantly in water. It was protected from hydrolysis by a gelatin capsule in the President's demonstration. The fish got it before the water did."

"But how about the water in the fish's blood? Wouldn't that decompose the molecule?" asked the Secretary of Commerce.

"The salinity of the blood strongly inhibits hydrolysis," said the Chief of Chemical Warfare.

"Won't there be a lot left over when we get up there?" said the Vice-President. "In the air and on the soil?"

"No," said the Secretary of War. "The material will have a surface life of only six weeks. Fortunately, the last traces will be decomposed by sunlight, oxygen, and atmospheric water vapor within that time. There is nothing to fear."

"What's to keep this deadly stuff from filtering down into our own air system during those six weeks," someone demanded.

"We have already closed off all of our air contacts. We anticipate no

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exposure here by air intake."

"But how do we live when we reach the surface," continued the Attorney General plaintively. "Our food can't last forever."

"By the time we leave here," said the Secretary of Agriculture, "the effect of the poison will be completely dissipated on the surface. It will be perfectly safe to plant crops on the surface."

Everyone of them was indeed afraid and concerned — but only for their own skins. It meant nothing to them that they were going to murder every human being above ground; indeed, every warm-blooded creature that moved on the face of the earth.

"We cannot stay," said the President flatly. "The Vortex was built centuries ago to drain off earthquake energies from our lower strata. It sits now at the apex of a slowly folding anticline. The rate of folding is now becoming so great that it is rapidly reaching the limits of the Vortex to re-radiate the vast amounts of temblor energy. When it reaches its limit, the strains in the anticline will give us a quake of Richter 8 or 9. Even a small quake would suffice to drop Dis into the river." He looked bleakly about the group. "Further delay is unacceptable. The capsule will be activated tonight."

For the last ten minutes I had been falling into one shock after another. (Small wonder I had not spilled hot coffee on some august head!) The so-called United States of America was going to emigrate to the surface within a few weeks. So I should immediately rescue Beatra and get us both topside, and warn my fellow surface citizens. Except that that would be all wrong. Because the poison in the gods-eye — or doomsday capsule — would be unleashed in a matter of hours, and everyone up there would die, including Beatra and me, if we were successful in escaping.

By now I had cleared the table, and I was beginning to distribute the desserts — which seemed to be some sort of frozen cakes. While all this was going on, I had been probing these minds for additional information.

From the mind of the President I had learned Beatra's whereabouts. She was, in fact, under interrogation in a high-security cellblock not far away on this same level. I thought I knew how to get there. But I didn't want to leave just now because I was discovering things that affected the historical future of life both above and below ground. It would be pointless to rescue Beatra and return with her to a dead world.

The alternate would be to take her to a hiding place somewhere here underground, until it was safe to go to the dead upper world. Even if this were possible, it was a thought too traitorous to contemplate. If our world was destroyed, we would die with it.

But we weren't dead yet. I had searched the mind of the Chief of Chemical Warfare, and I had learned the location of the control room for the doomsday capsule. It, too, was here in the Central Intelligence cluster.

I poured a last round of coffee, and then brought liqueurs and cigars. (How was it possible to grow tobacco underground?)

And now I was finished here. To stay longer would invite suspicion. And so I would leave.

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I paused to think a moment. The streets and corridors, especially those leading to the grotto, were swarming with guards. I not only had to destroy the doomsday capsule control room and rescue Beatra; I also had to get out with her, and safely.

To top it all, my vortectic powers were due to fade away within a few hours. I had no clock, and there was no way to keep track of the time, but I knew I would have to hurry.

It was time to act.

The President was just lighting his cigar, when several things happened. I moved behind him and formed a big light-ball over the table. He threw his hands over his face — as did they all — stumbled to his feet, and pulled a pistol from inside his tunic. I put my arm around his throat and stuck my own pistol into his spine. "Drop it," I whispered. The accent might have seemed strange to him, but he got the message explicitly.

He dropped it, gurgling.

I pulled him through the blinded, groping men to the elevator alcove.

20. The Control Room

I contacted Virgil. "It's time to join me again."

"I'm still hungry."

"Forget it. Come through the kitchen. Right outside the kitchen you'll find an elevator. That's a smallish metal room that will take you straight here. You get on, the door closes, the elevator comes up one level, stops, the door opens, and I'll be here waiting for you. Come on! Hurry! I don't know how long I can keep the people here under control."

"I think there are some people in the kitchen."

"Smile sweetly at them."

"Here I come."

In a moment I heard the clanking of cables in the elevator shaft. Next, the door opened, and Virgil came bounding out, tail wagging. "Who's *he*?" she demanded.

"This is the President of the United States. Treat him with respect, because he is going to help us get into the control room and then find Beatra, and then he's going to help us get out of here."

I had taken my arm from his throat and was pushing him along the corridor.

He rubbed his Adam's apple with one hand and his eyes with the other. He was still blinded. "Who are you?" he demanded hoarsely. "How did you make that light-thing? What do you want?"

"I am called Wolfhead."

"What?"

"I am he who seeks the kidnapped sun-devil woman."

He was silent a moment. "Ah, yes. So you are the one. You were on the tongue-board of my floater. We thought you died in the river. Are you her husband?"

"Yes."

"So you are not one of the Brothers, and yet you have these strange powers. We thought only your monks were able to utilize the Vortex radiation for telekinetic displays, and, even then, only after long training. Most interesting. I can see that we will be forced to bargain with you. You have come for

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your wife? Well, you can have her. You are both free to go."

I was silent. He expected, of course, that I would be happy to leave with Beatra and that I did not know we would both soon thereafter die by the doomsday capsule. How to accept his offer of Beatra and destroy the capsule simultaneously? There had to be a way. We continued to walk down the corridor. It was dark, and I used Virgil's eyes.

"Several people approaching up ahead," she warned. "I smell metal. Guns, perhaps."

"How many?"

"Four."

"That's fine. We can use them." I dipped into the mind of the President. "One of your patrols is coming. Do exactly as I say or I will splatter your spine forty feet up the hallway."

"Of course."

"It is simple. Just tell the corporal you want the patrol to accompany us to the doomsday control room."

He hesitated.

"Your choice, Mr. President." I jabbed the pistol muzzle hard into his back. He jerked with pain.

"All right." His voice shook.

The patrol came into clear view. The corporal saw us approaching. He barked an order. The four of them quickly unslung their rifles and the corporal called out again, this time to us: "Halt!"

"Corporal!" cried the President. "Put your weapons away and approach."

"Mr. President! Sir! I did not recognize —"

"No matter, Corporal. I want you to accompany us for a short distance."

"Of course, sir!" He looked at me, then at Virgil. I stood slightly behind the leader of this godforsaken land, and my weapon was still pressed into his back. I searched the mind of the corporal in an effort to determine whether he understood I held a gun. He did not. He was too full of surprise and wonder at his leader's bizarre entourage: kitchen boy and the biggest, fiercest looking dog he had ever seen in his life. The three guards of his little patrol were likewise more astonished than suspicious.

I followed the mental map in the President's mind, and within five minutes we turned a corner in the corridor and approached a *cul-de-sac* guarded by still another patrol. Their leader watched warily as we approached. I gave the President his instructions, and he passed the word to our corporal. "Go on ahead, Corporal, and tell them we are coming."

"Yes, sir." He took off, double-time, up the corridor. In a moment he trotted back. "I told them who you are, sir."

"Thank you, Corporal."

The standing patrol let us through.

We stood before the door.

And now I had several problems. It was no longer possible to keep the guards in front of us. They were now on either side, and they could see that I had a pistol stuck in the back of their President. The corporal of the standing guard was the first to notice.

Oh, I read him clearly! His first reaction was total astonishment; his second was to jump on me and take the pistol away by brute force. And then, a

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fraction of a second later, he realized that I would have time to kill the President.

"Tell him," I instructed my hostage, "that he and his men must drop their weapons. If they make any sudden movements, you will be the first to die."

"Yes," said the President huskily. "Drop your weapons," he told the corporal. "I have been taken prisoner. I order you not to attack this man."

I commended him. "Well done." And that led me to my next problem: how to open the door.

I knew, by searching the President's mind, that only two people in this entire underground city had access to the control room: the President and the Secretary of War. Except it wasn't quite that simple. There was a slot in the center of the door, designed to accept a small metal plate, coated on one side with magnetic iron oxides in a specific pattern. The other side of the card was highly polished and was designed to receive a fresh thumb imprint. And the President had left his identoplate locked in his desk in the Oval Office, back at the White House.

He smiled at me grimly. The thought formed in his mind: "We seem to have reached an impasse."

I did not reply. I was thinking. I could make him call a messenger to open his desk and bring the plate. On the other hand, the Secretary of War was undoubtedly closer; but did he carry *his* plate on his person? Probably not. Perhaps I should make the President send all these soldiers to the White House for the presidential plate. Good way to get rid of the soldiers. Only temporarily, of course, for a whole battalion would soon return. Anyway I did it, in ten minutes the whole city would know I was *here,* at the jugular vein of their emigration plan, with an electro at the spine of their beloved President. He would therefore have to come along with Beatra and me — else our lives wouldn't be worth a clipped florin.

He continued. "I suggest we leave this place immediately and proceed to the interrogation rooms. There you can take your wife, and you will be given safe conduct to the surface."

... where we would continue to enjoy life for not more than a couple of days, I thought.

"There is a phone on the wall," I told him. "Call the interrogation officer. Tell him to stop the interrogation and to give her whatever medical treatment is necessary."

The corporal and the President had a brief exchange, then the President picked up the handset and entered into a short dialog with persons unseen. I followed the President's part of the conversation and was satisfied that his instructions would be followed. "Get a report on her condition," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "You understand, the interrogation was pretty well along."

My voice was ice-cold. "You mean they have already begun the torture?"

"I don't know." He was sweating heavily. I read his mind. He really didn't know. But he suspected ....

I began to sweat with him. "Get a report."

There was another short conversation. He looked up at me. I could see the fright in his eyes. "There is some

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residual pain, but she will be sedated, and the long-term prognosis is good." His mind was blurred by fear. I couldn't read him clearly. But he believed she was still alive. (Or was that merely what *I* believed? Well, then, that's what I believed. For now. It had to be good enough. I could still get her out of here and get her to the monks. They could bring her back to health.)

"You had better hope she is alive and in good condition, Mr. President." I turned back to the door.

It was at that instant of turning that my gun hand was struck. I tried to react. I tried to pull the trigger on the pistol that would kill the President, and I think it actually may have moved a little. But the paralysis spread immediately from my hand into my arm and then over my entire body. Even as I stood there, feeling like a frozen idiot, I realized what had happened. This was the most heavily guarded door in all Dis. It was even more taboo than the entrance to the Vortex Chamber. It would, of course, have overhead TV-guided guns. Guards in another room had been watching us through closed-circuit TV all along, and they had fired as soon as they thought they could get a clear shot at me without endangering the President. Virgil went down in a sprawling heap almost at the same instant. From the way she dropped, I assumed she was dead.

I was in the very act of trying to form a light-ball, something that would at least blind the spectators, visible and invisible, when the second beam hit me. I think it was meant to kill me, and the only reason it did not was because at that instant both the floor and ceiling shook from a mild temblor, throwing me off balance and disrupting the sighting mechanism of the ceiling pistol. The second shot simply seared my leg. But it was enough to make me lose consciousness. As I fell, I thought, well, this is the end. I had done my best, and I had come very close, but I had failed, and now they would get on with killing Beatra. And me. And the world above.

21. The Poison Canister

I awoke groaning, in total darkness. It took me a long time to reorient my thoughts. I lay on my back on something pliant. A mattress laid out on the floor, perhaps. Not important. I tried moving my arms. They were free. And so were my legs. "Virgil?" I whispered mentally. No reply. They had probably killed her.

And why hadn't they killed me?

I heard low voices.

I reached out in mental alarm and touched minds. One was saying: "I think he is awake." Another: "We must tell him immediately that he is among friends."

The third said, "Stranger, do you remember me? Do you need more light?"

I recognized the mind. It was the colonel! I had locked him to the steering wheel of his floater. Evidently he had got loose. Anyway, here he was. I was glad. "A little more light would help," I said. "Do you have a light source here, or should I make a light-ball?"

Someone spoke up. "We can provide the light. We have heard that your light-balls can be quite devastating."

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The ceiling took on a dim radiance, and I was able to see my surroundings. The colonel stood at the side of my pallet, hands on hips, studying me gravely.

I shot a question at him. "My wife?"

"There has been no change since the President reported her situation to you. At that time, he ordered treatment for her recovery. So far, he has not countermanded the order. We believe he simply forgot her. Nevertheless, we consider that she is still in great danger. But we think you would both be in even greater danger if you were both able to return to the surface right away."

"Because of the doomsday capsule?"

"Precisely."

"How about the wolf?"

"As in your case, the temblor saved her from a direct hit. For a time she was in deep rigidity, which is to say, her heart was in spasm and her lungs paralyzed, but we connected her to an exterior oxygenated blood pump, and now she's recovering nicely in a nearby room. She is a very strong animal, and we think she'll be on her feet in half an hour."

"How did you get us here?"

"The disposal squad that picked up your two bodies was led by one of my men."

"Well, then, *why* ...?"

The colonel's brow wrinkled. "Why did I save your life? We're basically on the same side. A pity we didn't have more dialog before you fastened me to the steering column of my floater. Like you, I am now under a death warrant. I think we should work together."

"How?" I said cautiously. "I thought you were all for the great emigration."

"True. We have to leave here, and soon. The thing I'm against is the use of the doomsday capsule."

The colonel was an idealist. I was not so sure that the people of Dis would be welcomed with open arms on the surface. Our east coast was already becoming crowded, with nearly a million people squeezed between sea and mountains. But, on the other hand, I knew we wouldn't try to kill them *en masse*, either.

"Very well, then," I said. "At least you're against the doomsday capsule, and certainly so am I. But I also want to get out of here with my wife. How can we work together? Can you get to the doomsday control room?"

"Perhaps we don't have to."

"Then what do you have in mind."

"Consider the mechanism on the capsule. Three operations are necessary. First, the computer in the control room has to give instructions to the capsule to tumble one hundred eighty degrees so that the retro rockets will face forward. Next, the retros are given the order to fire. This causes the capsule to descend to the correct height. Finally, the capsule opens, and the cargo drops into the upper air currents."

I followed these very graphic mental pictures in his mind. "Yes?"

"That is the normal sequence. But there's a way to stop it before it begins."

"How?"

"In case the capsule machinery malfunctions before the sequence

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starts, the rockets will simply fire in their present rearward position, and the capsule will immediately enter an escape spiral that will send it into the sun."

"And I suppose you know how to make it malfunction?"

"We think *you* can do it."

But for the pain in my cheek muscles I would have laughed. "Colonel, I can do little magic tricks within a few dozen yards, but that thing is two hundred miles up."

"Four hundred fifteen at apogee, two hundred thirty at perigee," he said. "Nevertheless, if you could get inside it, mentally, I mean, you might be able to close a relay, short a fuse, cause a major oxgyen/hydrogen leak, any one of a number of things."

I shook my head regretfully. "Gentlemen, I am afraid my powers are subject to the inverse square law of radiation. At that distance I couldn't harm a fly."

The colonel persisted. "Within the hour, we expect a transit directly overhead. This means you will have the great strength of the Vortex at your command for several seconds."

Is it possible? I thought about it. "I would need to have the Vortex directly under me," I said.

"We can arrange it."

"You might have to forego quake protection for that several seconds."

"We think a few seconds will not matter."

"This Vortex," I asked. "Just what is it, exactly?"

"It is quite a story," said the colonel.

"I'd like to hear it."

"Very well, then. Let me start with a simple geologic fact. In the decades before the Desolation, when our ancestors were preparing Dis, they foresaw no danger from earthquakes.

"But then the Desolation came. The great bombs left vast empty craters where cities used to be. The physiography of the eastern seaboard was changed. Hills, valleys, lakes, and bays were created where none had existed before. The earth's crust was unbalanced. To equalize and relieve the strains in its new surface profile, the crust began to settle and shift. And then we discovered that Dis had been built over an anticline, a rock fold that had been formed and stabilized back in the Miocene, twenty-five million years ago. And that it was now becoming unstabilized. We couldn't leave. We couldn't return to the surface. The radiation was still lethal and would remain deadly for another twenty-seven hundred years. We couldn't dig away from the area of the anticline: it dominated the entire seaboard. We were becoming reconciled to doom when one of our greatest scientists proposed the answer: seize the nettle, grasp the thorn. In a word, scrape off the overburden from the anticline at its highest and weakest point, and build there the great Vortex, tuned to be suspended and rotated by the energy poured into it by temblors and latent quakes. The Vortex drains away energy from the anticline as fast as it is generated. Hence no quake-forming forces are allowed to accumulate within the anticline. The Vortex transforms this energy into new wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation. Like cosmic

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rays and neutron rays, this radiation passes through miles of rock. It meets all our heat requirements, and it renders our very walls luminescent. It is indeed our source of all energy. I understand that certain human mutants, sun-side, called the Brothers, are able to utilize this energy in strange ways. It is curious, I might add, that no one within Dis has similar talents. We think this is because we were never exposed to the overland radiation necessary to develop the mutation.

"But now our great Vortex is approaching overload, and we must leave here or die."

"Can't you build another Vortex?" I asked.

"The question was debated many years ago. They decided to emigrate instead. And now it is too late to do otherwise."

We were silent a long time. The colonel had indeed explained a great deal — everything except why my vortectic powers were due to cease within hours. I was about to ask him about this, when he said, "Speaking for the Demos, I have a favor to ask."

"Say on, Colonel."

"If we are successful in aborting the poison canister, you and your people will owe me some slight return."

"We will indeed."

"Then, tell your people that we come in peace. Tell them that we offer them no threat, but quite the contrary, we can offer to them all the technology of the ancients. Things they have not been able to rediscover, we learned in our infancy, and we are ready to teach everything. Your people will see us only during your hours of darkness, for we are, by nature of our vision, night people. And you need not fear our numbers; we are few, and you are many."

"I think it will be all right, Colonel. Once I convince the Brothers, I think the general populace will follow."

"Then let us be about our business, for we have very little time."

"We have no tracking equipment of our own," said the colonel. "However, we have a man on the tracking station at Central Intelligence, and we know that the capsule will be overhead in thirty minutes.

We were climbing a stairway roughhewn from limestone strata. "We call this the crater," explained the colonel. "Actually, it is two craters, one almost exactly within the other, a strange incident of the Desolation. The bottom crater filled with water, and the water percolated downward, leaching out these caverns and passages. The Demos helped nature, and now we have a passage all the way to the surface."

We were a group of three. The colonel's aide brought up the rear. Virgil bounded on ahead. She could smell wisps of air seeping from the surface, and she was trembling. Beneath our feet less than a thousand yards of rock separated us from the Vortex. Above, darkness lay on the face of the earth, and among the myriad twinkling light points there would soon be one very special one: the capsule.

We paused now before a small trap door hinged into the bottom of the tunnel. It was locked with chain and hasp, and the colonel opened it with a key. The little door swung inward. The

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night air began to flow in. Virgil began to dance.

"Let her go out first," I said.

"Good idea," said the colonel.

And so she went out. I kept in mind-touch with her. She saw nothing, smelled nothing, heard nothing. So we crawled out in single file.

Outside! We were on the surface! I got to my feet, inhaled deeply, and looked around me. The exit was cleverly hidden in a grove of mountain laurels interspersed among scrub pines. Above, in an arc on all sides, swept the rim of the great crater. This was the center of the abbot's map of concentric circles. I knew this place. It was only a few dozen miles southwest of Horseshoe Bay. I had hunted here. And that reminded me. Where was Virgil? I had lot contact. Well, no matter. She had earned her freedom. Her eyes and slashing fangs had served me well, and perhaps I would need her again, but she had opted for release. So be it.

I looked overhead and picked out the circumpolar stars. The Big Dipper. Cassiopeia. The Dragon. And then I found it. The gods-eye ... the capsule ... doomsday ... Barely visible, best seen by looking a little to one side of it.

A point of light, so small, so beautiful, and so deadly.

"Over here," said the colonel quietly. "I have already staked out the exact point where the center line of the Vortex intersects the crater."

We walked across through the brush.

"What will you do?" asked the colonel.

"Just before the capsule draws directly overhead," I said, "I will attempt to form a heat-ball in the control panel." I laughed shortly. "But you understand, I have never before tried to form a heat-ball at such a great distance."

"I know. But you must try. At this very spot in the crater there is theoretically what our technicians call a node — a point of magnified vortical power. There is, in fact, supposed to be a line of nodes extending along the vortical axis, away to infinity, above and below the Vortex."

The little point of light suddenly seemed to become brighter.

I dimly noted that the colonel was looking at the space vehicle through a telescope. He stiffened — then he cried out. "Something's happening up there! The rockets! The rockets are firing! We're too late!"

I grabbed the glass from him. It took me a moment to find the thing. And then I caught it. The little ship itself was still just a pinpoint of light. But in front of it there was a vast tongue of flame, and beyond the flame was a growing cone of luminous smoke.

This meant the lethal sequence had been started. I could no longer send it into outer space. It would be immune to all interference from here on in, up to and including the moment when it opened its doors to spew out its deadly cargo.

The colonel stood there, motionless, silent. But he did not have to explain what this meant.

And so it had been prophesied, and truly. One civilization lives, and one dies. It was now finally clear.

I began to tremble. Whether from the physico-mental impact of the node,

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or whether from the realization that earth's history was finally coming to an end, I do not know. The telescope fell from my nerveless hand.

I looked up at the poison-bird. If there were only a way I could get my hands on that death-canister! There had to be some way; there had to be something I could try. I cried out, "*Try!*"

And at that instant I felt a vibrant, tugging power. It swept through my body and my brain in an overwhelming tide. Time seemed to slow. The colonel's face seemed suddenly vacant. He had been saying something, and now his mouth was open, but no words emerged. I looked overhead. The little light was still there, but it had stopped moving.

I *knew.*

I was encountering again the strange phenomenon in which everything around me slowed down, and the universe seemed to be operating in some weird sort of slow motion. I knew from experience that that was not true. The universe was turning away at its regular rate of speed. It was I who had accelerated.

As I looked up, I sensed the series of nodes, extending a good three hundred miles and more overhead, straight through the capsule, and beyond. One such node completely enveloped the capsule.

It would not be quite accurate to describe now a *series* of events. The difficulty is that, although it would seem that certain things had to happen before other things could happen, yet the flow of time was so incredibly altered that the next several events did not necessarily occur in logical order.

I was on board the capsule. Perhaps to state it more accurately, some part of me was on board. I remember thinking at the time, this is impossible. This cannot be happening. But now that I am here in the capsule, I will die, because of the cold and the lack of oxygen.

I located the handle to the floor boards and lifted them up.

And there it was. A small innocent black box, no bigger than my hand. It was connected to some rather clever machinery. I could see how a clockwork mechanism would automatically open a port in the side of the space vehicle and then the little door on the box would open, and a spring-loaded device would thrust the box contents outside the capsule into space.

So I did a thing, a certain thing, the work of timeless moment.

Next, I had a sensation of falling, bumpity-bump, for mile after mile, as though crashing down an endless ladder and hitting every rung.

And then I was back on the ground, dazed, trembling, nearly frozen, wondering why the colonel was staring at me in horror. No, not at me. At the little black box that I held so casually in my right hand.

"*I don't believe it ...!*" he whispered.

I didn't either. I felt faint, and I knew I was about to collapse.

He reached out and took the poison canister just in time.

22. Beatra

The colonel held the black box with

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both hands. He looked at me, and I looked at him. He backed off a step. "No," he said.

"I can use it," I said. "Beatra is still a prisoner here. But the entire city is hostage to me if I have the poison. The President will have to let me have her."

"No," he insisted. "You could not exchange the poison for her, for then the President would have the poison, and what he would attempt with it would be quite unpredictable. There is no way that you can make use of it and live. And she would die too. If just a little gets in the air, all here will die. No, we can never use this. It must be destroyed."

I didn't necessarily agree, but I wasn't inclined to take it by force.

The colonel motioned to his aide, who brought him a pail of drinking water. The colonel dropped the canister into the water. It bobbed up and floated inertly. He got a stick from somewhere, pressed the canister down to the bottom of the bucket, then hammered on the stick with his fist. Something gave. This time the box stayed at the bottom of the water. He left the stick in the budket. "The water will take care of it," he said. "And now we must close up here and see if we can find your wife. What ...?"

Startled, we all looked toward the laurel grove.

It was Virgil. "I have come back," she said to me, "because I was seized with premonitions. That piece of your brain within mine speaks of catastrophes soon to occur. I do not know whether I will fare better on the surface, or underground with you. What do you think, Jeremy?"

"I think I need you, Virgil."

"Possibly. But that hardly answers my question."

"I don't know the answer."

"No, you don't know. But a kind of luck pursues you, and the prophecies bespeak your survival. For these reasons it may be better for me to stay with you."

"Then come along, and let's try to be lucky."

The colonel locked up, and we followed him back down the dank twisted passages toward his floater, parked a couple of blocks down the street.

As we walked along, I put Virgil out in front and took her eyes. We expected no trouble. Nevertheless, I kept throwing my mind net over everyone who came close to us. I found nothing. A group of workmen returning from a night shift, were curious and uneasy about the "dog." An approaching guardsman ... wondering what would happen if he did not salute the colonel. But nobody ever found out, because as he drew abreast, he shrugged mentally, and saluted. So did the colonel.

Virgil, the aide and I got in the floater, and then the colonel got in at the controls and drove us through a back route into the Central Intelligence complex. The route involved only a couple of turns, and I memorized it for possible future use. We parked the ship at the official zone and got out. The aide and I followed the colonel up and down dimly lit halls to the interrogation section.

And now we approached our first check point.

Ever since my "return" from the

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space capsule I had been aware of a strange phenomenon. My rapport with the Vortex, instead of diminishing after I had left the line of nodes, had increased. I could sense its immense vibrant presence, a thousand feet below.

I tried a bizarre thing. I visualized the great central axis, whirling, whirling. And then I gathered all my will power, and I "leaned" into the upper part of the thing.

The Vortex shuddered, then broke into a massive continuing wobble. I could see none of this, yet I knew it was happening. How the Keepers must be scurrying about, checking their dials and gauges, and staring wide-eyed at each other!

I pressed the Vortex axis again. This time it leaned farther out. I sensed that the Keepers were now applying all the power in the gyroscopes to force the axis back into a steady vertical spin. I applied still more force. So did they. I wondered who would win an ultimate test of strength. But it was not my present object to find out. I locked in and maintained my present torque against the Vortex axis. I had what I needed.

"Colonel," I said, "I want you and your friends to leave Virgil and me now."

He looked at me blankly. "Why? You are going to need help to find your wife and get her out of here."

"I am grateful for your offer. Especially since it is made at a great personal risk. But for what I have in mind, Virgil and I must go on alone. Your presence would actually increase my danger, and Beatra's."

He shrugged. "As you will. In that case, I will gather my little band of Demos, and I will meet you on the surface."

"Yes. See you topside."

I followed his mind as he walked away with his aide. He kept looking back, fearful for me, puzzled, concerned. Perhaps he was right.

I was not at the check point, and the guard was studying Virgil and me suspiciously.

"Pay attention," I told him. "My name is Jeremy Wolfhead. I am the invader from the surface. I have already killed a number of your people, and I could easily kill you if I wanted to. But I choose not to harm you. Instead, I want you to tell your President that I would like to talk to him."

His cheeks, already ivory, turned an ashen white. Little beads of sweat began to form on his forehead. He leaned forward and spoke with shaking voice into the visibox. "Checkpoint Able. The sun-devil is here with his devil-dog and wants to talk to the President."

I waited quietly while the connections were made. I felt relatively safe. I had already read the guard's mind and I knew there were no overhead electrobeams at this gate. Later on, there would indeed be ways to kill me, but I did not think the President would use these until he satisfied his curiosity as to why I had been fool enough to return.

The next voice on the box was that of the President. It was all done very quickly, and I was both surprised and relieved.

"What do you want?" he asked.

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"My wife."

There was a brief silence. I had the impression he was whispering with someone. Then he said, "You are very near the interrogation chambers. I would suggest that you proceed to the next check point. You will receive further instructions when you arrive there. This guard will accompany you."

I smiled. He was too far away for me to read his mind, the guard's mind was wide open. The inner check point was highly guarded. There were overhead rifles and a cluster of police. "Very well, Mr. President," I said. I motioned to the corporal to start out and to walk ahead of me. "You had best leave your pistol here," I told him, "because if you don't, I will kill you."

He unbuckled his holster, laid it on the desk, and we set out.

I explored the minds waiting for us around the bend in the corridor. Six or seven guardsmen. They had already received instructions, and their weapons were out. The rifle butts were pressed against their shoulders, and they were taking aim. Not to mention three overhead television electros.

The corporal was becoming more nervous as each step brought us closer to my waiting death. He did not want to get caught in the line of fire.

"Call out to them," I told him. "Tell them I have a very important message for the President."

"Yes, sir!" He put his hands to his mouth and shouted: "Hold your fire! The sun-devil claims he has an important message for the President!"

I sensed a hurried consultation around the corner. After that, the leader, a lieutenant, was apparently on the phone talking to the President. The President ordered them to put their arms down and let me approach the visibox on the guard desk. The lieutenant did not object. Firstly, the orders were straight from the President. Secondly, they both knew that I would still be covered by the overhead rifles. Those rifles were a chance I had to take. I knew the President felt personally safe from me for the moment, and that he was indeed curious as to my message for him.

I approached the box. "I have come to bargain for my wife and safe passage."

"Bargain?" He laughed. "You are in no position to bargain. I could kill you where you stand."

"You would be running a grave risk, Mr. President. For some moments now I have been synchronized with the Vortex. And for several moments I have been applying a torque to its spin-axis. The Keepers know only that some unaccountable force is being exerted against the Vortex. They have countered my force with an opposite and equal force, applied to the central gyroscope within the Vortex. If I should suddenly release my control, the Vortex would be immediately subject to the force of the gyro counter force. And that counter force would overwhelm the Vortex before it could correct itself."

"I don't believe you."

"Call the Vortex Chamber."

He did. I could not hear what they told him on the telephone. But I knew what the general content of the message had to be.

"It is so," he said thoughtfully. "Very well, then, the woman may leave

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with you." His face on the screen nodded to a guard, who then went into an adjoining room. "How do I know you won't release the Vortex suddenly after you leave here?" he asked.

"Basically, you don't. On the other hand, I would be a fool to destabilize your Vortex while I am still underground."

He was silent a moment; then he shrugged. "Very well. I suppose I will never know whether you could truly harm the Vortex. But I accept the possibility that you might. You may go, and take the woman. She will be out in a moment, and you and she and the animal will be escorted to one of the regular police floaters in the parking area. You can drive it out, the same way you came in."

Even though I could not get into his mind during any of this, I knew that he thought in the end it would make no difference. As far as he understood the situation, Beatra and I would be dead of the poison in a matter of hours.

They brought her out.

My mind was in hers even before I saw her. She was unconscious, apparently heavily sedated. But images of terror and pain still beat chaotically within the confines of her cerebrum, running to and fro like frightened forest creatures trying to escape a fire. Horrid things had been done to her. Before they wheeled her out on the little cot, I knew this. And a part of me knew exactly what they had done, but it was a dread knowledge buried in my subconscious, and to protect my sanity I could not permit it to come forth into my present waking knowledge.

She was accompanied by a man in a long white gown. I was in his mind too. He said, "She is presently resting. She will be fine as soon as the sleeping potion wears away." He lied.

I now bent over her. It had to be done. I studied these once perfect lips. I saw the tiny bloody holes that minutes before had held the sutures that bound her lips together. Very gently I squeezed down the lower jaw and looked into the oral cavity. It was nearly empty. The tongue had been cut out.

I knew what had happened to her. They had done it to the Returner, and now to her. They had given to her the Vow of Silence.

It struck me now that I knew the identity of the Returner. I knew the floater, wrecked and burnt in the grotto. My mind did now what it had resolutely refused to do these past twenty-odd hours: it admitted that it recognized the charred figurehead on the prow of that floater. it was a wolfhead.

And that voiceless Father Phaedrus, that mad withered monk who had given me such vivid mental images, taken, they said, from the Returner. Phaedrus had tried to tell me a great thing, and I was too dense to grasp it. ("You have understood very little," he had chided me.) Ah, small wonder he had been able to transmit such clear and crystalline pictures from the Returner's broken mind. Yes, there was the thing my grandfather knew, and the Brothers knew, and that no one had dared tell me: the ravaged Returner and the shattered Father Phaedrus were one and the same man, namely, my father.

Once again, I saw him in the floater, escaping down-river. Where

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had he got the floater? He may have stolen it. They may even have thrown him into it, and turned it loose over the river, for sport. No matter. I rode with him, through the forest of stone pillars, over the falls, and down the canyon, and then somewhere, down the next and greatest, and final sickening fall, far, far below until the helpless little craft was thrown with all the waters of Lethe into the molten earth cleft. Through all this, the staunch walls and thick transparent hood must have remained intact. And it would seem that the floater had not itself touched the surface of the molten rock. He had piloted well. And now the journey upward, in the middle of a column of superheated steam. Then he was through, and out, and stumbling from his smoking craft, and collapsing on the long snow dune.

To him, my father, they had done this.

And now my wife.

From the visibox the President studied me with cold eyes. His face was totally without expression.

Something was happening inside my brain. I was losing control. I remember thinking, after all this time, I can't slip now. Bit it did no good. Things were slipping away.

I began to tremble. My teeth chattered and I remember listening to curious rattling sound: it was the knocking of my knees.

Then something like lightning struck me. Time stopped. I was paralyzed.

When time began to flow again, I knew I had done a colossal thing. And the consequences I understood very well.

My vortical powers were gone. I was still able to enter minds, but I no longer had the power to make a ball of light, or to do anything that drew on the power of the great Vortex.

What had happened?

I knew.

The thing that I knew was this: I had done something terrible to the Vortex. At the moment, I felt a certain detachment about what I had done. I found myself discussing the situation dispassionately with myself. Had I knocked it off its axis? Was it now spinning off-center like a gyrating top in its last throes, with the Keepers desperately trying to restablize it? No, what I had done was much worse than that. The thing that I had done, and the reason I had lost my vortical powers, was that — in my murderous emotional reaction — *I had moved the Vortex out of its chamber* altogether! And where was it now? In the river, alongside the entrance to the Vortex Chamber, and very likely inundating the dock area with crashing waters cast up in its dying agony. In seconds even this greatest of machines must yield to the force of the torrent and be swept and tumbled to the waiting maw of the great chute that led down to the molten magma. After it had its assignation with Hades, it would be blown out through the Spume, broken, shattered, a great puzzle to all who would see it in future generations.

But the President did not know any of this. Not yet. He did not know that he could kill me immediately and with impunity. Nor was I inclined to enlighten him. He would understand all too soon.

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I grabbed the front handle on the wheeled stretcher and pulled it toward the waiting floater. Virgil followed close behind.

Someone was calling to the President. He turned away.

The walkway was shuddering under my feet as I slammed the vessel door shut. There was an odd haze in the air. Dust began to swirl around the machine. The automatic windshield jets came on and washed the glass area clean. I looked up. Flakes of rock were filtering down from the street ceiling. There were a couple of clicks as bigger pieces hit the floater hood. The foreshocks had begun. Fortunately, the floater's transparent panels were thick and apparently were hermetically sealed. But I was concerned about Beatra. I did not want her to get bounced about. I looked around the cabin interior hurriedly. There was a bench on one side, complete with straps, probably for prisoner control. I quickly transferred Beatra to it, prone, and strapped her in as best I could. I tossed the stretcher out.

As I pulled away, I looked behind me.

A dozen guards were running to the line of floaters waiting in the vehicle area. Evidently the Keepers had already notified the President. But why should he care about me now? He must know the earthquake was coming. Ah, he must want very much to take a floater full of henchmen and escape to the surface. But he probably felt trapped, because he thought the space capsule had already emptied its death canister, and the contents would be reaching the earth's surface within hours. And so he told himself, if *he* had to die, I, the invader, had to die too, and first.

Even now, at this very late stage, I would have been glad to tell him he had nothing to fear on the surface, and that he still had time to save some of his people. But it was futile even to think about it.

Our floater got a considerable start on our pursuers, but they had special pursuit vessels, and they were gaining on us. Also, the bow gun of the foremost vessel began firing. I immediately began to zigzag my ship. It made me lose precious time, but I could not risk damage to the ship or to Beatra at this stage, especially since I could not see the entrance to the colonel's secret exit passage half a mile ahead.

I thought once of forming a lightball to blind my pursuers. And then I remembered. I couldn't form a lightball. My vortectic powers had vanished with the Vortex sphere.

I stole a look at Beatra. She was still unconscious, and now she was beginning to breathe in guttural gasps. A drop of blood had trickled down the side of her mouth. I had to get her to the Brothers. She was dying. I controlled my thoughts and tried to concentrate on the next half mile.

It was going to be very dark in the old water-hewn passages. I fished around in the compartment under the dashboard for the portolamp. I never found it.

There was an explosion overhead. Great hunks of the street ceiling crashed down on the roof of the floater. They were firing accurately, and it was going to be very close.

Just then something flashed in the

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middle of the street, not far ahead of us, and another explosion rocked the floater.

I peered forward, unbelieving. A trio of police floaters were approaching swiftly from the front. The President had radioed ahead for reinforcements. We would never reach the colonel's secret passage.

Death lay ahead, and death lay behind.

We were trapped.

Why were they doing this? What difference did it make to them? I quickly probed the mind of the driver of the lead vessel. I got a shock. The President! He had assumed personal control of my pursuit and capture. Well, if he wanted the trophy of the hunt, he would have to earn it.

Here was an intersection. Do I turn right or left?

I knew already. It would be to the left. I knew from the memory wisp of the map in the guard house that if I turned left I would come to a descender. The descender would take me down a number of levels. To what? I didn't know for sure, but I could guess. What was the bottom layer to this doomed city?

The river.

Our floater was already around the bend and diving nose first into the descender. The air whistled past the floater skin as it screamed down. We were still in the descender shaft when the first shell struck the bottom of the shaft with a blinding crash. And this was fortunate, because neither Virgil's eyes nor my headlights showed the terminus clearly. I arched up just in time, headed down the only exit. My tall skid actually brushed a piece of rubble on the descender bottom.

Would I now crash into some dank dead-end, or would I find the river? And what difference would it make? For the river led but to the Spume, and Beatra would never survive that dread journey. I looked down at her white face. I detected no movement beneath the bonds that held her to the side bench. Did she still live? I could not stop to find out.

There was a sudden great booming behind me. Something back there was collapsing. Another severe temblor. I wondered whether it had caught any of my pursuers. I stole a look at the rear-view mirror. There were a pair of lights moving back there. That meant at least one floater. The Persident? Probably. He alone would be this persistent, determined that my death should precede his.

"Watch it!" cried Virgil into my mind.

I dodged something big in the middle of my path.

A stone pillar!

I was over the river.

Another left turn, and I was threading the pillars and moving downstream.

Was this victory? Yes, indeed! As long as we lived, we were winners. If we strung out life another five minutes, we had at least won the five-minute prize.

Something exploded on my right. My pursuer was still shooting. It had to be the President. A trained guard would have been a much better marksman. Nevertheless, I took no chances. I weaved from one side of the river to the other, trying to keep as many pillars between me and my enemy as possible.

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And now things were happening to the cavern roof. Every few seconds a piece would fall into the river. I could hear splashes around me even through the thick panels of the floater, and the head beams picked up several disturbances in the water ahead. By some miracle, nothing struck us. I actually felt in more danger from those dislodged stones than I did from the following floater, for there was no evasive action I could take from them.

Another long, horrible boom off to one side. Then several crashes that came right through the hermetically sealed walls of my vessel. The end was coming.

We had passed the shaft area where, hours ago, Virgil and I had fallen into the river, and now we approached the falls.

What had happened to the pursuer? I had detected no sign of him for a mile. But no matter. We had other concerns. The temblors were now bringing down bigger and bigger sections of the arching ceiling, and stalactites, stalagmites, and stone pillars were being snapped and hurled about like sticks.

At that moment I noticed lights again in my rear-view mirror. It was he. I could not see his craft, but I knew.

And then the light was very suddenly snuffed out. Almost immediately a rolling boom shook my ship. The roof had fallen in on him, and it was still falling. I was glad. He deserved it. But if I were not to join him, I would have to hurry on.

We passed the dock of the Vortex Chamber. Even without shining my head beams directly on it, I could see the great hundred foot hole in the Chamber wall where the Vortex had burst through on its way into the canyon. My handiwork, but I had no time to admire it, and no time to speculate about the ultimate fate of the great sphere.

I ventured a look down at my wife. It was too dark to see her. I peeked into her mind. She still lived.

On we sped down the chasm. Walls, channel, ceiling were falling, cracking away, collapsing all around us. It was miraculous that our little ship had not been hit. For the moment it led a charmed life, but that couldn't last. Our only hope to escape immediate death was to accept the deferred death of the Spume: down, down, falling with the river into the hell-hot gut of the earth and then tossed up again within the column of steam. Down one leg of the V, then up the other.

Faster and faster, slanting down, down. There was a sickening feeling in my stomach. Virgil whimpered. But there was no retreat. Behind us, a world was dissolving.

We struck the torrent. The ship went under water. There were a few trickles inside, but generally the water seals held.

Still down, down, with the irresistible flood.

In a moment the ship would hit bottom, possibly even touch a sea of red-hot flowing magma — and that would be the end.

But the ship touched nothing. It paused, stopped dead in the water, and seemed to hang momentarily in liquid space. In *liquid* water. There was no steam. It wasn't even warm.

And now we were rising again.

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Slowly at first, then faster and faster, like a bubble in water.

Were we coming back up into the river? No. Nothing so simple. We were truly rising in the other leg of the V. How could this be? What had happened to the magma? Evidently something had plugged the bottom of the V so that the water could not contact the hot liquid rock. And I knew what it must be — what was serving to insulate the river from that submerged lava. The thing that had plugged the great hole was the Vortex sphere. But it couldn't last. The heat must soon melt the sphere shell, and after that the waters would strike the magma once more. And the entire water plug in my arm of the V would be blown up into the skies with volcanic violence — with my floater riding on top of it like a cork.

But we had a chance.

The floater had by now risen to the top of the water column. It bumped into the walls of the Spume shaft from time to time, but not violently enough to break the windows. There was a lot of water in the cabin floor, but, even so, the leaks were small and the seals held pretty well.

The waters had stopped rising. Perhaps we had reached the level of the river, and this was as high up the Spume channel as we would be carried.

I peered upward through the overhead portal, but I could see nothing. I had hoped to see a tiny piece of sky, but either it was still night outside or else the channel made a bend that shut out a view of the heavens. No matter. We had to get out of here. The Spume would reactivate at any moment.

I turned the ascension control lever. The ship didn't budge an inch. I turned it back and forth a couple of times. No luck. The mechanism was probably waterlogged. I had just about given up when we began to move. But then I noted that we hadn't left the water surface. We were moving because the water column was moving. The Vortex sphere had evidently broken up and no longer served to insulate the waters of Lethe from the magma within the earth. The bottom of the V was unplugged. Far below us vast and instant quantities of steam had been made, and we were being shot out of the Spume muzzle, like the lead ball in an ancient gunpowder rifle.

Virgil and I were thrown to the floor of the cabin and pinned there as though by a great flattening hand.

Up and up we went, faster and faster. A couple of times the little vessel bounced off the channel walls, and I thought we were done for.

We burst through the mouth of the Spume crater at an unimaginable velocity. And we were soaring and beginning to decelerate. I was able to crawl to the controls. I actually had time to look out, and down, over the Spume-stricken wasteland. None of the control levers responded to my frantic tests. Everything was shorted or jammed. We reached the apex of our flight parabola at about two miles, and now we began to fall.

Beatra, I thought, you will never awaken. But at least there will be no pain.

How long does it take to fall two miles? I have never worked it out. All I remember is, in the beginning it seemed to stretch out forever, but in the

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end it seemed to be almost instantaneous. I knelt by Beatra and held her hands. They were icy.

And then we crashed, and I blacked out.

The next thing I remember, I was carrying her out of the floater and skidding and sliding down to the bottom of a soft white hill, where Virgil already awaited us.

We had fallen into the side of the Spume's snowdune, which, despite the fact that it was early summer, was still largely unmelted. The snow had saved our lives.

"How is she?" asked Virgil.

"She's in bad shape. We have to get help."

Several body-sized boulders fell in a cluster not a dozen feet from us. The Spume was now beginning to discharge an accumulated burden of debris swept into it by the river.

"We have to get out of here," I said. "Make for the hill."

Beneath us the earth shook and shuddered. We hurried on up to the crest of the hill. And it wasn't just the Spume ejecta that we had to worry about. The underground quakes would soon strike the surface with equal fury. At any moment there might be land slides that would carry us back down to the very mouth of the Spume.

In the near dark we began the toiling ascent to the rim of the hill. Several times, rock avalanches swept down on either side of us.

Only a few of the brighter stars were still visible. There was a definite dark-blue tint in the skies. Dawn was well on its way, and the sun would be up in half an hour.

But we were still not secure. Clutching Beatra to my body as best I could, I tumbled down the other side of the hill. We were halfway to the valley when I looked down in the dim dawn light and saw the earth moving. Giant ripples were advancing across the surface of the land. It was like watching the sea. They were leisurely waves, perhaps a hundred yards from crest to crest, and eight to ten feet high. As they came on, I could see what they were doing to the trees. At first, the treetops would seem to move majestically with the advancing wave front, leaning at first to the front, then to the rear, and then, within a few seconds, a great many of the individual trees seemed simply to pop out of the ground. There they lay, stricken and broken.

A great cloud of dust was stirred up by these surface waves, mercifully blotting out the destruction that was left behind.

Virgil whimpered and pressed against my leg.

And then the earth was moving under us. We were all thrown to the ground. I sensed that the disturbances moved rapidly on up the hill behind us.

And then, save for a prolonged fading roar and the hanging dust, it was over.

I looked up toward the hill crest. It was gone. The whole hill was gone. Everything there was as level as our fields and meadows back home.

It was easy to visualize what had happened underground. If anyone had survived the series of preliminary temblors, this big quake would have crushed him before he could have moved ten yards. Very few of them could have

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suffered very long. Some — living and dead — were perhaps swept into the great river, and would emerge hours later in the Spume as unrecognizable bits of broken bone and thoroughly cooked flesh. The carrion creatures would feast for days about the Spume cone.

I had destroyed a three-thousand year dream.

"God pity them," I whispered. But it was hard to feel anything.

I picked up Beatra, and the three of us headed down the valley where I hoped I would find the colonel's party. I could take one of his ships and get Beatra to the Brothers in New Bollamer.

I smiled grimly. Just as the Brothers had predicted, *their* vortical powers were gone now, too, and they couldn't have the faintest idea why.

After a few hundred yards I had to rest. I laid my wife down gently on a patch of mossy turf. She looked strangely at peace, as though the events of the past weeks and the last hours were a total fabrication conjured up in my mind alone. Her eyes were closed as if in soft sleep.

I just stood there, in a numb stupor, looking down at her.

Virgil threw back her head and began to howl.

Epilog

As I finish these pages I hear the cries of wild geese overhead. For three nights running, I have heard them. I must lay down my pen, for these signs of spring overwhelm me. I must step outdoors, upon the rough porch of my cabin, and then out into the patch I have shoveled out of the winter snows, and look to the skies.

It is early April, and my lungs and heart fill with wonder at the beauty of the night and of this place.

But back to my history.

How did it all end? That is perhaps the wrong question.

Parts of New Bollamer and some of the nearby villages were pretty well shattered by a series of great quakes of that last hour, now so long ago, but these places have long since been rebuilt, better than ever. Our manor was not touched, nor was grandfather or his shops. I think he still lives, but I am not sure. I never go into the villages anymore.

Colonel Aksel and his handful of technicians got out just before the main quake. They were quickly welcomed and absorbed into the factories of New Bollamer. Within a decade they advanced our technology a century. And all this despite a certain weakness of the eyes. I understand they now number among the richest and most influential of our citizenry. These men represented the last traces of Dis, a place now gone after a grim and static history of thirty centuries. Is anyone still down there? Did anyone escape the temblors and quakes? I think it doubtful, but, actually, I will never know for sure. All entrances have been long collapsed, and there is no longer any access to the city. I do not want to know. It is all part of a nightmare that I want to forget.

In that last hour, on what was once a hillside, Virgil and I parted. I said to her, "Go north and west, into Vania,

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Nyock, Canda. You were once a hunter. You can hunt again. The woods are full of game. Rabbits, deer. Find a wolf pack. Some old lobo will think you're the prettiest thing that ever came down the trail. Raise a family."

"Yes," she said agreeably, "I will indeed be a hunter. Of men. And my cubs will hunt men, for I will teach them. I have found the human liver to be a rare delicacy. And I have found his heart, preferably still struggling to pump blood, a gourmet's delight. Ah, yes, I have tasted his blood, and I can read his mind. I will hunt him easily. He will learn to fear me."

"Well, Miss *Loup-garou*, just don't get yourself shot."

"*Loup-garou?* Yes, that's it. Werewolf. I have the body of a wolf, but I am not a wolf. I have part of your mind, but I am not you, not a human being. And that's because of what you have done to me. I have an insert from a male human mind in the body of a female wolf. Am I male or female? Am I wolf or human? It is not good to die, not knowing who you are, and with your last thoughts overlain with perplexing ambiguities. Good-by, Jeremy."

Without a backward look she bounded away and disappeared into the scrub. Have I seen her since? Sometimes I think so.

Beginning at this little clearing, the hillock sweeps up to a summit. It is on that ridge that I think I sometimes see Virgil. She never comes any closer. But on a cold and frosty morning, when the chill makes a fog of my breath, I might see her head silhouetted against the gray sky.

I come now to the gentle mound of earth. There is no stone to mark it, and it is brown and desolate under its patches of snow. But as spring comes on, it will soon be ringed about with crocuses and daffodils. And then will come the scent of wild cherry pollen, even though there are no wild cherry trees anywhere in the forest hereabouts.

Laughter by a Waterfall
One evening late I wandered here
To sit and watch the pounding foam
And then I thought I heard you call
Too late I whirled. For you were gone.
Hair Tossed in the Wind
Where have gone those golden strands
That worked a glamor on the air
And caressed the fingers of my hands
As oft I touched those cheeks so fair.
Snowflakes on a Grave
At morning when the sun is low
When dark blue shadows laced with light
Attend me in my walk,
I hear the rippling river flow,
I hear he limp-top hemlocks sigh
And on this mound the snowflakes knock
But there is no answer.

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DARK AND BRIGHT

As is well known to everyone but people, Harlan Ellison and I love each other, and there is no feud between us.

Of course, Harlan has the fastest quip this side of Dorothy Parker, and very few people can stay undemolished for more than fourteen seconds (at the outside) if they start up with him. Fortunately, I am an exception and have frequently lasted an easy thirty-seven seconds, so we have at each other now and then for the fun of it, and that is what starts the rumors of feuds.

Naturally, in so doing, we take off on each other's physical characteristics, since neither of us is exactly well-known as models of good taste in the heat of quippery. Since Harlan is slightly below the American average in height and I am slightly above the American average in weight, when we get together I make short jokes and he makes fat jokes.

We were together at the Nebula Awards dinner on Saturday, April 30, 1977*, and I made some casual mention of planning to lose some weight.

**I am not even going to tell you who won the Nebula in the novelette category on that great occasion, because I am incredibly modest.*

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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Whereupon Harlan said, "In that case, I'll gain some height."

Well, maybe Harlan can't do that, but it takes us back to the Martian satellites, which we were discussing last month, and which seemed to have gained in size as we learned more about them — with interesting results which we will now continue to probe.

As I said last month, the first good look at Phobos, the inner satellite, showed us that it was cratered. In fact both satellites, Phobos and Deimos, are crater-saturated, in the sense that every spot on their surface is part of one crater or another.

This is not really a surprise. There is a general consensus among astronomers now that the various bodies of the Solar system were formed by accretion — that is, small particles conglomerated into larger particles, which in turn conglomerated into still larger ones, and so on.

Finally, when sizable bodies were formed, they were bombarded by slightly less sizable bodies, later collisions forming craters that demolished and masked those formed by earlier collisions until, finally, the last collisions left craters that remain, more or less, to this day.

Perhaps four billion years ago, the chief period of crater formation was over. Space was cleared of most of the sizable free pieces, and the Solar system took on the shape, more or less, that it now possesses. There were still occasional collisions, and now and then new craters, even a spectacular one, might be formed, but they represented mere footnotes. The book itself was written.

Once all the final craters are formed, is there any force that would wipe them out?

Sure. If a body is large enough to ignite as a star, and if it becomes a glowing mass of gas, any craters it might have had in an earlier solid stage would go. So would all irregularities except for gouts and swirls of incandescent gas. The Sun is an example of that.

Second, if a body has a sizable ocean, or a thick atmosphere, or heavy volcanic activity, or an active biological system, or any combination of these things, craters might be reduced or even be obliterated by the erosive effects of water and wind, by the efflux of molten lava, by the working of living things, or by any combination of these.

The best example is Earth, where all four effects are to be found and where virtually none of the primordial craters, or even very recent ones, geologically speaking, still exist. Meteor Crater in Arizona is the best example of one that exists. It is unmistakeable in nature because it was

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only formed a few tens of thousands of years ago in a dry area. There are also a few circular formations, usually partly water-filled, which can be recognized as one-time craters from the air, and that's all.

We can't tell what goes on under the heavy atmospheres of the four outer giant planets, but it doesn't seem conceivable, if anywhere below the visible cloud layers there is a solid surface, that heat and atmospheric action would not have wiped out any craters that might have once existed.

We know a little more of what goes on under the cloud-layer of Venus, which is closer, smaller, and less gaseous than the giants, thanks to radar-reflection studies. Recently, astronomers have detected signs of something on Venus that may indicate a volcano even larger than Olympus Mons* on Mars.

Assuming ample volcanic action on a planet almost as large as Earth and even hotter, and remembering that Venus has an atmosphere about a hundred times as dense as ours, we can be reasonably sure that what craters existed have in large measure been eroded and molten away. Still, since Venus lacks an ocean or (almost certainly) life, it may be more cratered than Earth is.

Even on Mars, which is colder and smaller then either Earth or Venus, which has only a trifle of atmosphere, and which seems to have no life (except just possibly some microscopic forms), there has been enough volcanic action to wipe out the primordial craters over about half its surface.

Any bodies smaller than Mars, however, which are quite likely to have none of the attributes required for crater-erasal, should be heavily cratered.

This seems to be true of Mercury, for instance. Most of it has been mapped by Mariner 10, and it seems uniformly stippled with craters. It is certainly true of the Moon — except that there are some areas that seem to have been levelled by lava flows to form the "seas." Perhaps this is the result of particularly large collisions at the end of the crater-forming process, but just about all the maria seem to exist on the side of the Moon that perpetually faces the Earth, which is rather a puzzle.

It is probably true of all the satellites of the outer planets, except possibly for Titan, which has a respectably thick atmosphere. **Of course, we have made no very good direct observations of the surfaces of these

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**See THE OLYMPIAN SNOWS, F & SF, June 1975*

***See TITANIC SURPRISE, F&SF, July 1975*

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different satellites except for some indications of craters on Ganymede in pictures taken by Pioneer 11.

But on Phobos and Deimos — which are tiny, airless, waterless, lifeless, and heatless — what can possibly erase craters? Nothing.

They are the closest objects to Earth (except for an occasional flit-by asteroid) which possess surfaces that may be exactly as they were when the crater-forming period ceased. They would therefore represent the oldest surfaces one can possibly have in the Solar system and for that reason alone it is worth examining the Martian satellites as closely as possible, and even planning a human landing some day.

Based on the photographs of Phobos by Mariner 9, a preliminary map was made, showing about fifty craters. On this map the equator and the prime meridian cross at the end of the longest axis — that end which faces Mars (see last month's essay).

One large Phoban crater, about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) across, near the south pole, is named Hall. This is appropriate since it was Asaph Hall who discovered the satellites.

An even larger crater, at the equator and just a little west of the prime meridian, is named Stickney. This is even more appropriate, since when Hall had decided to give up the search, his wife, whose maiden name was Angelina Stickney, urged him to try one more night — and that proved the crucial night of discovery. Stickney is 10 kilometers (6 miles) across and is about 40 percent as wide as the maximum diameter of Phobos.

Since the map was made, new and even better observations by the Viking probes have revealed narrow parallel grooves along Phobos's cratered surface, these grooves being more or less parallel to the equator. The significance of these is as yet unknown.

Deimos, a smaller body, has, as one might expect, smaller craters. The largest, which is 2 kilometers (1.3 miles) wide, is named Voltaire. The next largest, which is half as wide, is named Swift.

Why those two names? Well, thereby hangs a tale —

As soon as Jupiter was found to have four satellites (that was in 1610), the German astronomer, Johann Kepler, who loved to play with numbers, pointed out that Mars ought to have two satellites. After all, Earth had 1 and Jupiter had 4, so wasn't it only natural that Mars, which was the planet in between, should have 2?

Actually, there is nothing to the argument, for the number of satellites a planet may have is indefinite. For instance, the current number of

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known satellites of Jupiter is not 4, but 14.

Just the same, there is always an attraction to neatness in numbers, and Mars's two imaginary satellites cropped up now and then in literature, especially since someone as respected as Kepler had mentioned it.

In 1750, for instance, the French writer, Voltaire, wrote a book called "Micromegas," in which giant beings from Saturn and from the star Sirius visit Earth to observe humanity and to marvel at its follies. On their voyage to Earth, Voltaire has them observe Mars's two satellites in passing.

Even earlier than that, in 1726, the English writer, Jonathan Swift, published "Gulliver's Travels." In the third part of that book, Swift has Gulliver visit the mythical land of Laputa, where the astronomers were supposed to possess advanced telescopes that made it possible for them to discover the two Martian satellites.

Swift's discussion of the two satellites was particularly important because he actually gave his imaginary worlds specific distances from Mars and specific periods of rotation. He placed the inner satellite about 20,000 kilometers (12,500 miles) from Mars, with a period of revolution of 10 hours, and the outer satellite about 34,000 kilometers (21,000 miles) from Mars, with a period of revolution of 21 1/2 hours.

That's not very far from the truth. The actual inner satellite, Phobos, is only half the distance of Swift's, and the actual outer satellite, Deimos, is only two-thirds the distance of Swift's, but that still leaves it a remarkable bit of intuition.

How did Swift know? Mystics have tried to make much of this by supposing Swift to have had access to hidden knowledge, or to have had some sort of paranormal powers. (Some have even, in joking, suggested he might have been a Martian.)

Actually, there is no secret to Swift's good guess; he was using his head. As for having Mars possess two satellites, that number was in the air, as I said, and the fact that it turned out to be true in the end was pure coincidence. From then on, though, it was just deduction.

Mars is so close to us that if it had a good-sized satellite at a reasonable distance from itself, those would have been discovered by Swift's time. After all, Jupiter and Saturn are much more distant than Mars is, and yet satellites had already been discovered for those planets. The conclusion was that if Mars did have two satellites, they would have to be quite small so as to be hard to see, or quite close to the planet so that they were lost in Mars's glare of light, or both.

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For that reason, Swift, who was no dummy, put them close to the planet. Then, if they were close, they would have to revolve about Mars in short periods. In fact, from the distance, the period of revolution can be calculated by Kepler's third law, and Swift refers to it in the passage.

In any case, the craters on Deimos are named appropriately, though I would have, given my choice, reversed matters and given Swift's name to the larger.

What are the satellites doing there? In general, there are three ways of explaining the existence of satellites:

1) The coalescing fragments of a planetary cloud conglomerate into a single body which then splits off one or more fragments.

2) The coelescing fragments form more than one nucleus to begin with, the largest one at the center and smaller ones at the outskirts of the original cloud.

3) The coalescing fragments form one nucleus which then proceeds to capture small bodies that happen to pass close by under conditions where gravitational capture is possible.

The first possibility was very popular in connection with the Earth and Moon at one time but has now been largely given up. It seems to be growing less and less popular in general, so let's forget it.

That leaves the other two possibilities. There is the simultaneous-formation theory, and the capture theory — but how does one decide between the two?

An easy way of deciding would be to suppose that if a planet and a particular satellite were formed out of the same cloud, they would have the same general composition; while if they were formed out of different clouds, they could have different, even radically different, compositions.

It's not quite as easy as that, however.

A particular whirling cloud out of which a planet is forming may not have the same chemical composition throughout. There may be a settling-out process taking place, with denser materials settling toward the center faster than less dense materials would. Thus, the four major satellites of Jupiter have densities that seem to decrease steadily with distance from Jupiter, but no one thinks they were captured for that reason.

Then, the particularly large central planet would have a more intense gravitational field than small satellites would. The planet would attract the light gaseous elements that the satellites would not. Thus, Jupiter is

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largely hydrogen and its four major satellites are composed largely of ices and rocks, but no one suspects them of having been captured for that reason.

In the case of Earth and Moon, there is a much smaller disparity in size than in the case of Jupiter and its satellites, so that we would expect lesser chemical differences to exist if Earth and Moon were formed out of the same cloud of material.

The Moon's chemical structure is different from that of the Earth, but is it different enough to indicate formation out of different clouds? Opinions differ. The Moon's peculiar chemical structure may arise out of the face that because of its smaller mass and lesser gravity, it never had air or water and was therefore more exposed to changes in temperature. On the other hand, the common occurrence of glassy material on its surface may show that it was at one time much closer to the Sun than Earth was.

The evidence is, so far, equivocal, and the astronomers find, in frustration, that even landing on the Moon, bringing back Moon-rocks, and studying them in detail, has not forced a clear decision between the simultaneous-formation theory and the capture theory of the Moon's origin.

But what about Mars and its satellites? Can we come to any decision there?

What about simultaneous formation?

Why not? Might not the Martian satellites be two final pieces of conglomerating matter that just happened to be moving in the right direction and at the right speed to take up an orbit about Mars and never crash into it to form the final two craters?

It could be that there were a great many such satellites four billion years ago which collided with each other, bouncing back and forth, till all hit Mars, leaving a final pair which just happened to be far enough apart not to collide with each other ever, so that neither had anything to stir it out of its safe orbit.

But in that case, how is it that they are both moving in orbits about Mars that are just about circular and are just about in the plane of Mars's equator. Why might not the two last pieces just happen to have elongated orbits travelling about Mars in any plane?

Apparently, such satellites are subjected to a tidal drag which tends to move them into those orbits where the drag is at a minimum — which would be a circular orbit in the equatorial plane. Such tidal drag is more

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effective, the more massive the central planet and the less massive the satellite, and even in a circular orbit in the equatorial plane a small satellite might be pulled closer to the planet through tidal drag.

Some years ago, it seemed that Phobos was approaching Mars at a rate that was out of proportion to what one would expect from its size. The rate of approach could only be explained by supposing Phobos to have an astonishingly small mass.

The Soviet astronomer, Iosif Samuilovich Shklovskii, suggested that Phobos couldn't possibly be that un-massive unless it were hollow and even postulated that it might be a space station built by an advanced Martian civilization. (That was, of course, at a time when there still seemed to be some vague possibility that there were canals on Mars, built by intelligent beings.)

The notion of "Space-station Phobos" was destroyed in three ways. In the first place, the Mars-probes made it clear that there was no advanced civilization on Mars. Second, the first photographs of Phobos showed it had to be solid since anything capable of forming the craters upon it would have smashed it into fragments if it had been hollow. Third, the rate at which Phobos was approaching Mars turned out, on more careful measurement, to be no faster than would be expected for a solid body of Phobos's size.

Even so, Phobos is approaching Mars and it may crash into the planet in about 100 million years. If Phobos has been in place ever since Mars was formed, about 4,600 million years ago, then we are seeing the small satellite in the last 2 percent of its lifetime. But the law of conservation of momentum must be upheld. If Phobos is very slowly approaching Mars, Deimos must balance this by very slowly receding from Mars.

Unfortunately, tidal drag would place the Martian satellites in their present position, even if they were captured bodies, that had originally formed in some other cloud of coalescing material.

If the satellites were captured as theypassed on their way from somewhere else we could argue that the chances would be virtually certain that they would have elongated orbits that were highly inclined to the equatorial plane. At least, at the time of capture and for a considerable period afterward.

This is true, for instance, of the nine outermost satellites of Jupiter; of Phoebe, the outermost satellite of Saturn; of Nereid, the outer satellite of Neptune, all of which astronomers confidently believe to represent captured bodies.

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In earlier articles I thought that the fact that Phobos and Deimos had circular orbits in Mars's equatorial plane was sufficient proof that they were not captured, but were natural satellites, but I had not taken tidal drag into consideration. The captured satellites of the outer planets are so far away from the planet they circle and may have been captured so recently (astronomically speaking) that tidal drag has not yet had time to circularize and equatorialize them.

Similarly, whereas I have often thought that the fact that the Moon's orbit was not in Earth's equatorial plane was in itself ample evidence that it was captured, it may simply be that it happened to form in an odd orbit naturally out of the same cloud but is so massive compared to Earth that tidal drag has not yet had time to complete the circularization and equatorialization.

The Martian satellites are, however, so small and so close to Mars, and may have been captured so long ago, comparatively, that tidal drag *has* had a chance to produce circular orbits in the equatorial plane for them.

It follows that from their orbits alone, it is impossible to tell whether Phobos and Deimos formed in the neighborhood of Mars, or were captured.

In that case, what about chemical composition?

There we may have something. Mars is a comparatively bright planet. Even discounting its atmosphere, it reflects quite a bit of light from its ruddy, oxidized, iron-rich soil.

The two satellites, however, are not like that at all. They are surprisingly and unexpectedly dark (as I explained last month) so that their sizes were larger than had been calculated assuming a reasonably high albedo (or reflecting power).

This business of dark and bright, dark for the satellites and bright for Mars, seems to weight the chances in favor of the capture theory for Phobos and Deimos.

Captured from where?

The answer to that is easy. Beyond Mars is the asteroid belt, which is something like a primitive hangover from the infant days of the Solar system. The asteroid belt, it would seem, is a place where the matter of the original cloud began to conglomerate but then remained as tens of thousands of separate bodies and never completed the process of forming a single planet.

This case of arrested development may have been the result of giant

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Jupiter's gravitational influence. It may be that Jupiter drew so much material out of the asteroid belt as to leave insufficient material to produce a total gravitational effect capable of forming a planet.

We can play with the notion, then, that two of the innumerable asteroids were captured by Mars; that they had elongated and inclined orbits to begin with, but that tidal drag put them into their present circular orbits in the equatorial plane.

Is that very likely? Would there be any asteroids likely to have orbits that would bring them close enough to Mars to be captured?

Absolutely! We know of a number of asteroids with orbits that are elongated enough to be beyond that of Mars at aphelion, but closer than Mars (and Earth and Venus, too, in some cases, and in one extreme case, even Mercury) at perihelion.*

It is not at all beyond the bounds of possibility, then, that two asteroids had orbits supplying a very occasional rendezvous with Mars that made capture a possibility.

Next question. Does the fact that the satellites are dark fit the suggeston that they are of asteroidal origin?

The answer to that, surprisingly, is yes — or, at least, yes, if we go by the thinking of the last few years.

Consider the albedo of the Moon, for instance, which is 0.06. That means that it reflects six percent of the light that falls upon if. This is what would be expected of a world without air and water, which presents to the Sun the kind of rock of which the crust of a normal world (that is, one like ours) would be built. Thus, the albedo of Mercury, which is likewise airless, waterless, and surface-rocky, is 0.07.

If we find airless worlds with albedos higher than that of the Moon or of Mercury, we can assume they are not composed of normal rock. For instance, the four large satellites of Jupiter all seem to have albedos higher than that of the Moon or of Mercury even though it seems quite certain they possess no more than atmospheric traces. In the case of Io, the albedo is even as high as 0.54. We can assume that the surface of these satellites is composed of something shinier than rock — of ices of various sorts, of caked salts and so on.

As to the asteroids —

But space is up. Let's go into the matter of asteroid albedos next month and educe from that still another reason why a human landing on the Martian satellites might, conceivably, be even more interesting than a landing on Mars itself.

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*See *UPDATING THE ASTEROIDS*, F & SF, August 1974

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Woody Allen is of course best known as a movie actor and director, the creator and star of films such as Play It Again Sam, Sleeper, *and, most recently, the touching and hilarious* Annie Hall. *When Mr. Allen is not playing the clarinet or making movies, he writes humor, mostly for the* New Yorker, *some of it fantasy and science fiction. Here is a first-rate example.*

The Kugelmass Episode

by WOODY ALLEN

Kugelmass, a professor of humanities at City College, was unhappily married for the second time. Daphne Kugelmass was an oaf. He also had two dull sons by his first wife, Flo, and was up to his neck in alimony and child support.

"Did I know it would turn out so badly?" Kugelmass whined to his analyst one day. "Daphne had promise. Who suspected she'd let herself go and swell up like a beach ball? Plus she had a few bucks, which is not in itself a healthy reason to marry a person, but it doesn't hurt, with the kind of operating nut I have. You see my point?"

Kugelmass was bald and as hairy as a bear, but he had soul.

"I need to meet a new woman," he went on. "I need to have an affair. I may not look the part, but I'm a man who needs romance. I need softness, I need flirtation. I'm not getting younger, so before it's too late I want to make love in Venice, trade quips at '21,' and exchange coy glances over red wine and candlelight. You see what I'm saying?"

Dr. Mandel shifted in his chair and said, "An affair will solve nothing. You're so unrealistic. Your problems run much deeper."

"And also this affair must be discreet," Kugelmass continued. "I can't afford a second divorce. Daphne would really sock it to me."

"Mr. Kugelmass —"

"But it can't be anyone at City

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College, because Daphne also works there. Not that anyone on the faculty at C.C.N.Y. is any great shakes, but some of those coeds..."

"Mr. Kugelmass —"

"Help me. I had a dream last night. I was skipping through a meadow holding a picnic basket and the basket was marked 'Options.' And then I saw there was a hole in the basket."

"Mr. Kugelmass, the worst thing you could do is act out. You must simply express your feelings here, and together we'll analyze them. You have been in treatment long enough to know there is no overnight cure. After all, I'm an analyst, not a magician.

"Then perhaps what I need is a magician." Kugelmass said, rising from his chair. And with that he terminated his therapy.

A couple of weeks later, while Kugelmass and Daphne were moping around in their apartment one night like two pieces of old furniture, the phone rang.

"I'll get it," Kugelmass said. "Hello."

"Kugelmass?" a voice said. "Kugelmass, this is Persky."

"Who?"

"Persky. Or should I say The Great Persky?"

"Pardon me?"

"I hear you're looking all over town for a magician to bring a little exotica into your life? Yes or no?"

"Sh-h-h," Kugelmass whispered. "Don't hang up. Where are you calling from, Persky?"

Early the following afternoon, Kugelmass climbed three flights of stairs in a broken-down apartment house in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. Peering through the darkness of the hall, he found the door he was looking for and pressed the bell. I'm going to regret this, he thought to himself.

Seconds later, he was greeted by a short, thin, waxy-looking man.

"*You're* Persky the Great?" Kugelmass said.

"The Great Persky. You want a tea?"

"No, I want romance. I want music. I want love and beauty."

"But not tea, eh? Amazing. O.K., sit down."

Persky went to the back room, and Kugelmass heard the sounds of boxes and furniture being moved around. Persky reappeared, pushing before him a large object on squeaky roller-skate wheels. He removed some old silk handkerchiefs that were lying on its top and blew away a bit of dust. It was a cheap-looking Chinese cabinet, badly lacquered.

"Persky," Kugelmass said, "what's your scam?"

"Pay attention," Persky said. "This is some beautiful effect. I developed it for a Knights of Pythias date last year, but the booking fell

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through. Get into the cabinet."

"Why, so you can stick it full of swords or something?"

"You see any swords?"

Kugelmass made a face and, grunting, climbed into the cabinet. He couldn't help noticing a couple of ugly rhinestones glued onto the raw plywood just in front of his face. "If this is a joke," he said.

"Some joke. Now, here's the point. If I throw any novel into this cabinet with you, shut the doors, and tap it three times, you will find yourself projected into that book."

Kugelmass made a grimace of disbelief.

"It's the emess," Persky said. "My hand to God. Not just a novel, either. A short story, a play, a poem. You can meet any of the women created by the world's best writers. Whoever you dreamed of. You could carry on all you like with a real winner. Then when you've had enough you give a yell, and I'll see you're back here in a split second."

"Persky, are you some kind of outpatient?"

"I'm telling you it's on the level," Persky said.

Kugelmass remained skeptical. "What are you telling me — that this cheesy homemade box can take me on a ride like you're describing?"

"For a double sawbuck."

Kugelmass reached for his wallet. "I'll believe this when I see it," he said.

Persky tucked the bills in his pants pocket and turned toward his bookcase. "So who do you want to meet? Sister Carrie? Hester Prynne? Ophelia? Maybe someone by Saul Bellow? Hey, what about Temple Drake? Although for a man your age she'd be a workout."

"French. I want to have an affair with a French lover."

"Nana?"

"I don't want to have to pay for it."

"What about Natasha in 'War and Peace'?"

"I said French. I know! What about Emma Bovary? That sounds to me perfect."

"You got it, Kugelmass. Give me a holler when you've had enough." Persky tossed in a paperback copy of Flaubert's novel.

"You sure this is safe?" Kugelmass asked as Persky began shutting the cabinet doors.

"Safe. Is anything safe in this crazy world?" Persky rapped three times on the cabinet and then flung open the doors.

Kugelmass was gone. At the same moment, he appeared in the bedroom of Charles and Emma Bovary's house at Yonville. Before him was a beautiful woman, standing alone with her back turned to him as she folded some linen. I can't believe this, thought Kugel-

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mass, staring at the doctor's ravishing wife. This is uncanny. I'm here. It's her.

Emma turned in surprise. "Goodness, you startled me," she said. "Who are you?" She spoke in the same fine English translation as the paperback.

It's simply devastating, he thought. Then, realizing that it was he whom she had addressed, he said, "Excuse me. I'm Sidney Kugelmass. I'm from City College. A professor of humanities. C.C.-N.Y.? Uptown. I — oh, boy!"

Emma Bovary smiled flirtatiously and said, "Would you like a drink? A glass of wine, perhaps?"

She is beautiful, Kugelmass thought. What a contrast with the troglodyte who shared his bed! He felt a sudden impulse to take this vision into his arms and tell her she was the kind of woman he had dreamed of all his life.

"Yes, some wine," he said hoarsely. "White. No, red. No, white. Make it white."

"Charles is out for the day," Emma said, her voice full of playful implication.

After the wine, they went for a stroll in the lovely French countryside. "I've always dreamed that some mysterious stranger would appear and rescue me from the monotony of this crass rural existence." Emma said, clasping his hand. They passed a small church. "I love what you have on," she murmured. "I've never seen anything like it around here. It's so ... so modern."

"It's called a leisure suit," he said romantically. "It was marked down." Suddenly he kissed her. For the next hour they reclined under a tree and whispered together and told each other deeply meaningful things with their eyes. Then Kugelmass sat up. He had just remembered he had to meet Daphne at Bloomingdale's. "I must go," he told her. "But don't worry, I'll be back."

"I hope so," Emma said.

He embraced her passionately, and the two walked back to the house. He held Emma's face cupped in his palms, kissed her again, and yelled, "O.K., Persky! I got to be at Bloomingdale's by three-thirty."

There was an audible pop, and Kugelmass was back in Brooklyn.

"So? Did I lie?" Persky asked triumphantly.

"Look, Persky, I'm right now late to meet the ball and chain at Lexington Avenue, but when can I go again? Tomorrow?"

"My pleasure. Just bring a twenty. And don't mention this to anybody."

"Yeah. I'm going to call Ruper Murdoch."

Kugelmass hailed a cab and sped off to the city. His heart

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danced on point. I am in love, he thought, I am the possessor of a wonderful secret. What he didn't realize was that at this very moment students in various classrooms across the country were saying to their teachers, "Who is this character on page 100? A bald Jew is kissing Madame Bovary?" A teacher in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, sighed and thought, Jesus, these kids with their pot and acid. What goes through their minds!

Daphne Kugelmass was in the bathroom-accessories department at Bloomingdale's when Kugelmass arrived breathlessly. "Where've you been?" she snapped. "It's four-thirty."

"I got held up in traffic," Kugelmass said.

Kugelmass visited Persky the next day, and in a few minutes was again passed magically to Yonville. Emma couldn't hide her excitement at seeing him. The two spent hours together, laughing and talking about their different backgrounds. Before Kugelmass left, they made love. "My God, I'm doing it with Madame Bovary!" Kugelmass whispered to himself. "Me, who failed freshman English."

As the months passed, Kugelmass saw Persky many times and developed a close and passionate relationship with Emma Bovary. "Make sure and always get me into the book before page 120," Kugelmass said to the magician one day. "I always have to meet her before she hooks up with this Rodolphe character."

"Why?" Persky asked. "You can't beat his time?"

"Beat his time. He's landed gentry. Those guys have nothing better to do than flirt and ride horses. To me, he's one of those faces you see in the pages of *Women's Wear Daily*. With the Helmut Berger hairdo. But to her he's hot stuff."

"And her husband suspects nothing?"

"He's out of his depth. He's a lackluster little paramedic who's thrown in his lot with a jitterbug. He's ready to go to sleep by ten, and she's putting on her dancing shoes. Oh, well ... See you later."

And once again Kugelmass entered the cabinet and passed instantly to the Bovary estate at Yonville. "How you doing, cupcake?" he said to Emma.

"Oh, Kugelmass," Emma sighed. "What I have to put up with. Last night at dinner, Mr. Personality dropped off to sleep in the middle of the dessert course. I'm pouring my heart out about Maxim's and the ballet, and out of the blue I hear snoring."

"It's O.K., darling. I'm here now," Kugelmass said, embracing

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her.

I've earned this, he thought, smelling Emma's French perfume and burying his nose in her hair. I've suffered enough. I've paid enough analysts. I've searched till I'm weary. She's young and nubile, and I'm here a few pages after Léon and just before Rodolphe. By showing up during the correct chapters, I've got the situation knocked.

Emma, to be sure, was just as happy as Kugelmass. She had been starved for excitement, and his tales of Broadway night life, of fast cars and Hollywood and TV stars, enthralled the young French beauty.

"Tell me again about O.J. Simpson," she implored that evening, as she and Kugelmass strolled past Abbé Bournisien's church.

"What can I say? The man is great. He sets all kinds of rushing records. Such moves. They can't touch him."

"And the Academy Awards?" Emma said wistfully. "I'd give anything to win one."

"First you've got to be nominated."

"I know. You explained it. But I'm convinced I can act. Of course, I'd want to take a class or two. With Strasberg maybe. Then, if I had the right agent —"

"We'll see, we'll see. I'll speak to Persky."

That night, safely returned to Persky's flat, Kugelmass brought up the idea of having Emma visit him in the big city.

"Let me think about it," Persky said. "Maybe I could work it. Stranger things have happened." Of course, neither of them could think of one.

"Where the hell do you go all the time?" Daphne Kugelmass barked at her husband as he returned home late that evening. "You got a chippie stashed somewhere?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm just the type," Kugelmass said wearily. "I was with Leonard Popkin. We were discussing Socialist agriculture in Poland. You know Popkin. He's a freak on the subject."

"Well, you've been very odd lately," Daphne said. "Distant. Just don't forget about my father's birthday. On Saturday?"

"Oh, sure, sure," Kugelmass said, heading for the bathroom.

"My whole family will be there. We can see the twins. And Cousin Hamish. You should be more polite to Cousin Hamish — he likes you."

"Right, the twins," Kugelmass said, closing the bathroom door and shutting out the sound of his wife's voice. He leaned against it and took a deep breath. In a few hours, he told himself, he would be back in Yonville again, back with

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his beloved. And this time, if all went well, he would bring Emma back with him.

At three-fifteen the following afternoon, Persky worked his wizardry again. Kugelmass appeared before Emma, smiling and eager. The two spent a few hours at Yonville with Binet and then remounted the Bovary carriage. Following Persky's instructions, they held each other tightly, closed their eyes, and counted to ten. When they opened them, the carriage was just drawing up at the side door of the Plaza Hotel, where Kugelmass had optimistically reserved a suite earlier in the day.

"I love it! It's everything I dreamed it would be," Emma said as she swirled joyously around the bedroom, surveying the city from their window. "There's F.A.O. Schwarz. And there's Central Park, and the Sherry is which one? Oh, there — I see. It's too divine."

On the bed there were boxes from Halston and Saint Laurent. Emma unwrapped a package and held up a pair of black velvet pants against her perfect body.

"The slacks suit is by Ralph Lauren," Kugelmass said. "You'll look like a million bucks in it. Come on, sugar, give us a kiss."

"I've never been so happy!" Emma squealed as she stood before the mirror. "Let's go out on the town. I want to see 'Chorus Line' and the Guggenheim and this Jack Nicholson character you always talk about. Are any of his flicks showing?"

"I cannot get my mind around this," a Stanford professor said. "First a strange character named Kugelmass, and now she's gone from the book. Well, I guess the mark of a classic is that you can reread it a thousand times and always find something new."

The lovers passed a blissful weekend. Kugelmass had told Daphne he would be away at a symposium in Boston and would return Monday. Savoring each moment, he and Emma went to the movies, had dinner in Chinatown, passed two hours at a discothèque, and went to bed with a TV movie. They slept till noon on Sunday, visited SoHo, and ogled celebrities at Elaine's. They had caviar and champagne in their suite on Sunday night and talked until dawn. That morning, in the cab taking them to Persky's apartment, Kugelmass thought, It was hectic, but worth it. I can't bring her here too often, but now and then it will be a charming contrast with Yonville.

At Persky's, Emma climbed into the cabinet, arranged her new boxes of clothes neatly around her, and kissed Kugelmass fondly. "My place next time," she said with a

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wink. Persky rapped three times on the cabinet. Nothing happened.

"Hmmm," Persky said, scratching his head. He rapped again, but still no magic. "Something must be wrong," he mumbled.

"Persky, you're joking!" Kugelmass cried. "How can it not work?"

"Relax, relax. Are you still in the box, Emma?"

"Yes."

Persky rapped again — harder this time.

"I'm still here, Persky."

"I know, darling. Sit tight."

"Persky, we *have* to get her back," Kugelmass whispered. "I'm a married man, and I have a class in three hours. I'm not prepared for anything more than a cautious affair at this point."

"I can't understand it," Persky muttered. "It's such a reliable little trick."

But he could do nothing. "It's going to take a little while," he said to Kugelmass. "I'm going to have to strip it down. I'll call you later."

Kugelmass bundled Emma into a cab and took her back to the Plaza. He barely made it to his class on time. He was on the phone all day, to Persky and to his mistress. The magician told him it might be several days before he got to the bottom of the trouble.

"How was the symposium?" Daphne asked him that night.

"Fine, fine," he said, lighting the filter end of a cigarette.

"What's wrong? You're as tense as a cat."

"Me? Ha, that's a laugh. I'm as calm as a summer night. I'm just going to take a walk." He eased out the door, hailed a cab, and flew to the Plaza.

"This is no good," Emma said. "Charles will miss me."

"Bear with me, sugar," Kugelmass said. He was pale and sweaty. He kissed her again, raced to the elevators, yelled at Persky over a pay phone in the Plaza lobby, and just made it home before midnight.

"According to Popkin, barley prices in Krakŏw have not been this stable since 1971," he said to Daphne, and smiled wanly as he climbed into bed.

The whole week went by like that. On Friday night, Kugelmass told Daphne there was another symposium he had to catch, this one in Syracuse. He hurried back to the Plaza, but the second weekend there was nothing like the first. "Get me back into the novel or marry me," Emma told Kugelmass. "Meanwhile, I want to get a job or go to class, because watching TV all day is the pits."

"Fine. We can use the money," Kugelmass said. "You consume twice your weight in room service."

"I met an Off Broadway pro-

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ducer in Central Park yesterday, and he said I might be right for a project he's doing," Emma said.

"Who is this clown?" Kugelmass asked.

"He's not a clown. He's sensitive and kind and cute. His name's Jeff Something-or-Other, and he's up for a Tony."

Later that afternoon, Kugelmass showed up at Persky's drunk.

"Relax," Persky told him. "You'll get a coronary."

"Relax. The man says relax. I've got a fictional character stashed in a hotel room, and I think my wife is having me tailed by a private shamus."

"O.K., O.K. We know there's a problem." Persky crawled under the cabinet and started banging on something with a large wrench.

"I'm like a wild animal," Kugelmass went on. "I'm sneaking around town, and Emma and I have had it up to here with each other. Not to mention a hotel tab that reads like the defense budget."

"So what should I do? This is the world of magic," Persky said. "It's all nuance."

"Nuance, my foot. I'm pouring Dom Pérignon and black eggs into this little mouse, plus her wardrobe, plus she's enrolled at the Neighborhood Playhouse and suddenly needs professional photos. Also, Persky, Professor Fivish Kopkind, who teaches Comp Lit and who has always been jealous of me, has identified me as the sporadically appearing character in the Flaubert book. He's threatened to go to Daphne. I see ruin and alimony jail. For adultery with Madame Bovary, my wife will reduce me to beggary."

"What do you want me to say? I'm working on it night and day. As far as your personal anxiety goes, that I can't help you with. I'm a magician, not an analyst."

By Sunday afternoon, Emma had locked herself in the bathroom and refused to respond to Kugelmass's entreaties. Kugelmass stared out the window at the Wollman Rink and contemplated suicide. Too bad this is a low floor, he thought, or I'd do it right now. Maybe if I ran away to Europe and started life over ... Maybe I could sell the *International Herald Tribune* like those young girls used to.

The phone rang. Kugelmass lifted it to his ear mechanically.

"Bring her over," Persky said. "I think I got the bugs out of it."

Kugelmass's heart leaped. "You're serious?" he said. "You got it licked?"

"It was something in the transmission. Go figure."

"Persky, you're a genius. We'll be there in a minute. Less than a minute."

Again the lovers hurried to the magician's apartment, and again

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Emma Bovary climbed into the cabinet with her boxes. This time there was no kiss. Persky shut the doors, took a deep breath, and tapped the box three times. There was the reassuring popping noise, and when Persky peered inside, the box was empty. Madame Bovary was back in her novel. Kugelmass heaved a great sigh of relief and pumped the magician's hand.

"It's over," he said. "I learned my lesson. I'll never cheat again, I swear it." He pumped Persky's hand again and made a mental note to send him a necktie.

Three weeks later, at the end of a beautiful spring afternoon, Persky answered his doorbell. It was Kugelmass, with a sheepish expression on his face.

"O.K., Kugelmass," the magician said. "Where to this time?"

"It's just this once," Kugelmass said. "The weather is so lovely, and I'm not getting any younger. Listen, you've read 'Portnoy's Complaint'? Remember The Monkey?"

"The price is now twenty-five dollars, because the cost of living is up, but I'll start you off with one freebie, due to all the trouble I caused you."

"You're good people," Kugelmass said, combing his few remaining hairs as he climbed into the cabinet again. "This'll work all right?"

"I hope. But I haven't tried it much since all that unpleasantness."

"Sex and romance," Kugelmass said from inside the box. "What we go through for a pretty face."

Persky tossed in a copy of "Portnoy's Complaint" and rapped three times on the box. This time, instead of a popping noise there was a dull explosion, followed by a series of crackling noises and a shower of sparks. Persky leaped back, was seized by a heart attack, and dropped dead. The cabinet burst into flames, and eventually the entire house burned down.

Kugelmass, unaware of this catastrophe, had his own problems. He had not been thrust into "Portnoy's Complaint," or into any other novel, for that matter. He had been projected into an old textbook, "Remedial Spanish," and was running for his life over a barren, rocky terrain as the word "*tener*" ("to have") — a large and hairy irregular verb — raced after him on its spindly legs.

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REPORT ON COMPETITION 17

In the August issue we asked for future anachronisms, that is, anachronisms from historical novels of seven or eight centuries from now. The response was moderate to good; many entries seemed too obvious and not as hilarious as we'd hoped. Nevertheless, one clear winner (Mr. Queen's second entry was the clincher, of course), and some nice runners up.

FIRST PRIZE

Ringo left his horse tied to the hitching rail and pushed his way through the swinging doors and across the saloon's sawdust covered floor. It looked safe enough, but even so he kept his hand near the big .45 that he wore low on his hip. He let go a long stream of tobacco juice into a spittoon and said to the bartender, "I've got three months of trail dust to cut. Gimme a banana daiquiri. And when does the topless dancing start?"

It was early in the afternoon of July 12, 1977, when Bill dropped the letter into a corner mail box. He chuckled, thinking of the turmoil that the letter would cause when it was received across town on the next morning.

—Todd Queen

SECOND PRIZE

The summer of 1923 was hot in Washington, and Interior Secretary Albert Fall felt smothered by the heat as he waited tensely for the crucial call from President Warren G. Harding. When the phone rang he leaped to answer.

"Head Honcho?"

"Speaking."

"This is the Big Enchilada. They've got you with the smoking pistol."

"Expletive deleted! What's our game plan? Are we going to stonewall it or go the partial hang out route? And how will this play in Peoria?"

"Let me make this perfectly clear. My statements in your defense are inoperative. Forthcomingly, you're going to twist slowly, slowly in the wind."

—Mary Ann van Hartesveldt

RUNNERS UP

Old Knutt rinsed out the grounds of Yuban and nested the cup in his battered portable microwave. While he immersed himself in the routine of breaking camp, his mind ran ahead across the yellowing plains.

No damn use. The buffalo are gone. Even the redskins have all signed up with baseball teams or split back to India. Where does that leave me?

Turning his back on the unanswered question, he set off down the westing trail. The old buffalo gun grew heavy as one driver after another ignored his thumb....

—Cliff Cole

"Our family has always had a history of ill health," remarked the man as he wiped his nose. "My brother once caught the Legionnaires disease while serving in Algeria during the uprisings..."

—Robert Post

Finally, having dragged himself half a mile from the bustle of the bazaar, the legless beggar stopped before the house of Ali Habab. From beneath his turban he furtively drew the vizier's message while, never ceasing

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his reedy cry for alms, he lay down in the dust before the entrance and waited to be noticed. Soon, from the cool, dim recesses which his eyes could not penetrate, a veiled woman came to peer at him through the screen door.

—Dennis D'Asaro

Jefferson peeled off his sunglasses as he entered the Hall. Clutching his rough draft of the Declaration, he moved toward Franklin's coterie. "Hotter than a firecracker out there, eh Tom?" smiled Old Ben.

—Kenneth Ringlein

Silence lay spread over the town like a shroud, and the sun beat down mercilessly upon the two men who stood facing each other in the dusty street. Neither man stirred. Each was waiting for the other to make the first move. Sheriff Pat Garrett faced his one-time friend, Billy "The Kid" Bonney. Suddenly, Billy drew his gun, but before he could shoot, Pat had drawn his own gun and fired, putting a bullet through the other man's heart.

The dust and smoke had barely begun to clear before television newsmen were already swarming over the scene of carnage, taking footage for the evening newscast.

Mark T. Couch

COMPETITION 18 (thanks to Marc Laidlaw)

Competitors are asked to transpose two or more words in the title of an at least moderately well-known work of sf or fantasy, e.g.:

David Gerrold's *The Tribble With Troubles*
Lin Carter's *Great Short Adults of Novel Fantasy*
Asimov's *Before the Golden Book, Age 2*
E. R. Burroughs' *The Time That People Forgot*
And we ask that you limit yourself to a dozen entries.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by December 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, Six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 18 will appear in the April issue.

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